



Where to Begin: New Perspectives on Chinese Labor

Friday, July 2, 2010

July 2, 2010 in [Where to Begin](#) by [The China Beat](#)
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Studies of labor in China have taken an exciting turn in recent years with the publication of numerous rich and revealing portraits of workers, their jobs, and their place in Chinese politics and in the global economy. As thousands of migrant workers employed in auto parts suppliers for Toyota and Honda went on strike in May and June of 2010, [some headlines](#) heralded a political coming of age for China's migrant workers. While it's too early to assess the impact of these strikes, it is clear that migrant workers have gained a level of organizational sophistication and political awareness to make demands for higher wages, better working conditions, and in some cases, elections for union representatives. All of the books cited below offer readers who are new to the field of Chinese labor some perspective in which to understand the strikes of 2010 and the broader place of Chinese labor in the contemporary politics and society of China.

A January 2010 [London Review of Books](#) article by Perry Anderson hailed Ching Kwan Lee's [Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt](#) (University of California Press, 2007) with this accolade: "Although quite different in mode and scale, in power nothing like it has appeared since E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*." Thompson's 1966 classic on late 17th-, early 18th-century England brought to light the cultural contestation and repertoires of resistance as the moral economy of artisans and their guilds gave way to the mass production and mechanization of industrial capitalism. In *Against the Law*, C.K. Lee explores the moral economies and resistance of Chinese workers in two domains: first among the socialist working class in the state sector of the Northeast (the "rustbelt"), where the dismantling of the iron rice bowl brought an end to the social contract of job security and lifetime benefits, including housing. Lee compares the unmaking of the state socialist working class with the making of a new working class in the foreign-invested export sector of the South (the "sunbelt"). Here, migrant workers invoke the state's new labor legislation and pursue claims to rights protection and equal citizenship, in the face of widespread legal and social discrimination stemming from the household registration system (*hukou*).

In both the sunbelt and the rustbelt, protests remain highly "cellularized," or confined to groups of workers from the same factory who present to employers and local governments demands that are specific to their workplace, or their cohort within the factory (e.g., unpaid pensions, unpaid wages, overtime violations, etc.). This localized pattern of labor protest, and how it varies, is a common theme found throughout the field of Chinese labor. Scholars such as Elizabeth Perry have shown how fragmentation, rather than class formation, both facilitates labor protest and influences how the state connects with and controls labor movements and their leadership. William Hurst's [The Chinese Worker After Socialism](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2009) offers a regional account to this story of working class segmentation, showing how laid-off workers and their collective action is based on the political economy of different regions of China. Like Lee, Hurst provides illuminating details from interviews and fieldwork among laid-off workers who invoke different patterns of collective action and political symbols to press their demands.

While these accounts of the unmaking and remaking of Chinese labor in the 1990s rightly stress domestic political and economic forces, several recent books have also pursued international or external factors driving this process. These works show how China's openness to foreign investment brought institutions that replaced Maoist or socialist labor practices with labor law, employment contracts, and dispute resolution. Just how all of this happened, and why it wasn't more politically explosive, are questions addressed in Mary E. Gallagher's [Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China](#) (Princeton University Press, 2005). Gallagher shows that timing was everything: foreign direct investment coming to China in the 1980s created a laboratory for the reform of labor practices, and in the 1990s the politically sensitive reforms to China's domestic or state-owned enterprise sector could commence as this sector adopted the labor contracts and workplace norms found in the foreign-invested sector. Not that the process went smoothly, but the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership managed to prevent the formation of a broad-based opposition movement made up of laid-off workers.

The extent to which global capitalism influences labor in China is also a theme found in [The China Price: The True Cost of Chinese Competitive Advantage](#) (The Penguin Press, 2008) by Alexandra Harney, a Financial Times reporter. Among much else, Harney's book shows how the regime of factory inspections by NGOs and other international labor rights auditors is hampered by the way in which factory owners take a clue from corrupt accountants by keeping "two sets of factories"—one for showing to the auditors, and one for where the actual production takes place, with rampant labor violations and abuse.

The fields of labor history and labor studies have long been focused on questions of class formation, identity, and how capitalism or socialism influences workplace relations. China scholars such as Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Pun Ngai, Lisa Rofel, and many others have shed light on issues of identity and power relations within the Chinese workplace during pre- and post-1949 China. Many recent

publications pay close attention to the way identities and interests are influenced within the micro-environment of the workplace, with the empirical focus of the “workplace” broadened beyond the conventional look at the manufacturing sector. Two recent collections contain numerous chapters that explore workplace conflict and community (in sites ranging from department stores to merchant marine vessels to insurance sales agencies) and connect these issues to broader questions of power, culture, and political economy. [Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation](#) (Routledge 2007; edited by Ching Kwan Lee) and [How China Works: Perspectives on the Twentieth-Century Industrial Workplace](#) (Routledge, 2006; edited by Jacob Eyferth) contain several commendable portraits of Chinese labor based on ethnographies and participant-observation by the authors. In a similar vein, Calvin Chen’s [Some Assembly Required: Work, Community, and Politics in China’s Rural Factories](#) (Harvard University Press, 2008), based on his experience of working and living at two township and village enterprises (TVEs) in Zhejiang province, offers rewarding insights into how workers experience and interpret multiple meanings of labor, and how these change over time.

Where is all this impressive degree of collective action and assertion of individual autonomy shown by Chinese workers leading, and how will the Chinese Communist Party respond? The record of the Hu Jintao leadership suggests that the CCP is capable of renewing its frayed ties with Chinese labor, but the Chinese state is just as fragmented in its structure and capacities as the Chinese workforce is in making demands of the state. Dorothy Solinger’s [States’ Gains, Labor’s Losses: China, France, and Mexico Choose Global Liaisons, 1980-2000](#) (Cornell University Press, 2010) provides, as its title reveals, a valuable analysis of how China’s labor unrest and government responses to it compares with two other countries where states have both pulled the plug on longstanding labor policies and quickly needed to respond with new welfare measures and increased social expenditures. In [Socialist Insecurity: Pensions and the Politics of Uneven Development in China](#) (Cornell University Press, 2010), I show how fragmentation in the state has facilitated rapid increases in pension spending for urban Chinese workers but has also aligned political interests in such a way that expanding other benefits to the Chinese labor force will be difficult to achieve. Another signal policy response by the CCP has been to promote the spread of the party-controlled union (the All-China Federation of Trade Unions) to foreign-invested and private firms, a process of “unionization” that should always retain the scare quotes. While no book-length accounts of this process have yet been published, Marc Blecher’s 2008 article in [Critical Asian Studies](#) (“[When Wal-Mart Wimped Out](#)”) interprets the significance and considerable irony of the ACFTU’s decision to compel the world’s largest corporation and outspoken opponent of unions to organize ACFTU branches in its sixty stores in China.

For those looking to get a sense of the arguments of scholars of Chinese labor in chapter-length form, and for classroom use, two fine samplers of recent social science work on various aspects of the PRC that include chapters on labor are [Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance](#) (Routledge, 2010, Third Edition, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden) and [Chinese Politics: State, Society, and the Market](#) (Routledge 2010, edited by Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen). In addition, several authors discussed in this column have published chapters in an edited volume focused on the plight of the unemployed: [Laid-Off Workers in a Workers’ State: Unemployment with Chinese Characteristics](#) (Palgrave Macmillan 2009, edited by Thomas B. Gold, William J. Hurst, Jaeyoun Won, and Qiang Li).

Books by journalists who have turned their focus to workers and factories in China are also excellent sources for understanding contemporary Chinese labor issues. The personal portraits of the subjects found in Leslie T. Chang’s [Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China](#) (Spiegel & Grau, 2009) and in Harney’s [The China Price](#) show how migrant workers experience the labor market of the sunbelt, and how they preserve ties to their home communities and to one another. The sophistication and strategic purpose with which the migrant workers navigate through various employment channels belies the conventional wisdom of poor, undereducated migrants pouring into coastal export processing zones desperate for any form of work. Readers of Chang’s and Harney’s books, and any of the publications mentioned above, can find many clues to explain how and why migrant workers would eventually take to the streets as they did in spring 2010 to make unprecedented demands on the Chinese state.

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