

EDITORIAL ESSAY

FROM CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM TO RENEWED  
PESSIMISM: LABOR VOICE AND LABOR SCHOLARSHIP  
IN CHINA

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This introductory essay highlights the changing foci of labor scholarship during five distinct periods in the evolution of Chinese industrial relations. In so doing, the author argues that labor scholarship has oscillated between pessimistic and optimistic views regarding whether a labor movement is forming in China. The three articles brought together in this special section focus on the key themes of labor activism, collective bargaining, and the role of labor NGOs during a single period, 2006 to 2015. Together, the articles evidence optimism about the future of labor voice in China. This essay, however, suggests that the post-2015 period has been marked by changes in state policy that are having a chilling effect on labor voice and labor scholarship.

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In the short span of 40 years since China changed its economic strategy in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, its industrial relations system has undergone several transformative changes, in contrast to industrial relations systems in most countries, which have remained more “sticky” and gradually adaptive (Erickson and Kuruvilla 1998). The focus of labor scholarship has varied over the distinct periods in the evolution of Chinese labor relations, consistent with issues that were important during each period. In this introductory essay, I highlight the changing foci of labor research across these periods.<sup>1</sup> This discussion serves to frame the three articles in this special cluster, which deal with the 2006 to 2015 period.

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<sup>1</sup>This overview highlights major developments in Chinese labor scholarship, citing illustrative examples, but is not intended to be a comprehensive review.

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Pre-1978 labor relations scholarship focused primarily on two issues: 1) the “iron rice-bowl” industrial relations system, which bound workers to their work unit (*Danwei*) for life and was the source of cradle-to-grave welfare benefits such as housing, schools, child care, clinics and shops, services, post offices, and so forth, and 2) the dual role of trade unions as transmission belts of party ideology as well as representatives responsible for the welfare of workers (e.g., Naughton 1997). Walder’s (1988) work on communist-neotraditionalism is relevant to both streams noted above in its portrayal of the clientilistic relationship between workers and party leaders within the *Danwei*.

Labor relations scholarship in the 1978 to 1994 period tended to highlight the tensions involved in the transition to a more market-based economy. This literature included research on privatization reforms in state-owned industries, the development of joint ventures, and the problems caused by mass layoffs in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) as they tried to manage the transition from production based on targets to production for profit (see, e.g., Chan, Li, and Sculli 1989). As it became more evident that SOEs and joint ventures varied considerably in the pace of their adoption of modern employment relations practices, the state acted to decisively break the iron rice-bowl system through its 1994 labor reforms that effectively introduced short-term employment and signaled a new employment relations era (Gallagher, Lee, and Kuruvilla 2011; Gallagher 2017).

The 1995 to 2006 period saw a major expansion in Chinese labor scholarship, which was, in general, deeply pessimistic. A significant theme that continued from the previous period concerned the effects of the reform of state-owned companies, exemplified by the work of Hurst (2009), Chen (2000), Cai (2002), and Blecher (2002). The dominant theme, however, was the rich literature developed by labor sociologists and labor relations scholars that extensively documented the working conditions of (mostly) migrant labor in low-cost labor-intensive manufacturing for export factories—best exemplified by the works of Solinger (1999), Ngai (2005), Lee (1999), and Gallagher (2004). Topics here included the rise of sweatshops; the differences in employment conditions between migrant labor and workers with local hukou; the gender dimensions of low-cost production; the absence of adequate labor protection legislation; the limited efficacy of avenues for dispute resolution; and, most important, the steady development of informal employment in China. During the latter half of this period, as workers reacted to both exploitation and informalization by protesting and striking, scholars began to raise the question as to whether a Chinese labor movement was evolving (e.g., Chen 2000; Chan and Ngai 2009).

If the 1995 to 2006 period was characterized by depressing accounts of exploitation, sweatshops, rights violations, and rising conflict in Chinese industrial relations, the focus of scholarship in the 2006 to 2015 period not only built on this literature but extended it in several ways. It differed qualitatively in the sense that it was suggestive of a greater degree of optimism

(admittedly cautious) about increased worker contention and whether it would lead to a labor movement—although this optimism was tempered with realistic assessments of the obstacles to that ideal. Enduring themes during this period included the debates around the new labor legislation and its effects; the changing reasons for the intensification of conflict; and the growth in, and experiments around, collective bargaining. Scholars also examined the limited representation capacity and legitimacy of the official trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Finally, vibrant debates developed regarding whether a genuine labor movement could form or was forming, and specifically, the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in that effort. To this observer, this period could represent, relatively speaking, a “golden age of labor research,” characterized by a rich, varied, and burgeoning scholarship.

Finally, the current period (post 2015) is characterized by a centralization of state power coupled with a substantial increase in labor repression and restrictions on labor scholarship. On March 11, 2018, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) voted to abolish presidential term limits, paving the way for Xi Jinping to have indefinite tenure as China’s president.<sup>2</sup> The abolition of term limits was accompanied by the amendment of the national constitution to include Xi’s political theory. This action followed the addition of his theory to the communist party charter in October 2017. Xi is only the second political leader since Mao to have his political theory included in the constitution while in office. Xi now holds the “trinity” of important positions in China: General Secretary of the CCP, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and State President. As such, he is in a unique position to accelerate the consolidation of the CCP’s hold over China, which has fundamental implications for Chinese labor contention and Chinese labor scholarship. This period is characterized by a variety of crackdowns on labor that makes nascent movement formation impossible; it has also resulted in a chilling effect on Chinese labor scholarship. Although it is clear that the research agenda of Chinese labor scholarship needs to be re-oriented in light of these changes, debate continues about what issues to research; how to best conduct the research; and if research is possible, where to publish the work. My argument is that we are entering an age of renewed pessimism in Chinese labor scholarship and labor movement development.

### **Chinese Industrial Relations, 2006 to 2015: A Period of Cautious Optimism**

Three broad themes dominate this period: labor contention and state responses to it, collective bargaining, and the role of NGOs in helping workers with both contention and collective bargaining. A central issue underlay these three themes—whether a labor movement was developing in China.

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<sup>2</sup>Presidential term limits were introduced into the Chinese constitution after Mao’s death by his successor, Deng Xiaoping, to prevent indefinite one-person rule.

*Table 1. Strikes in China: 2006 to 2017*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of strikes</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of strikes</i>
2008	43	2014	1,358
2009	29	2015	4,132
2010	79	2016	2,664
2011	227	2017	1,256
2012	382	2018 (Jan.–May only)	764
2013	645		

*Sources:* China Labour Bulletin and Elfstrom and Kuruvilla (2015).

### **Labor Contention, 2006 to 2015**

The main focus of labor scholarship has been to try to explain the reasons behind the increase in labor contention (see Table 1), and how best to interpret this increase. That is, does the increase in strikes indicate the development of a labor movement?

Some scholars point to macro-structural reasons that might explain a greater willingness to strike. Gallagher et al. (2011) and Elfstrom and Kuruvilla (2014) suggested that economic forces, such as the labor shortage that emerged in the early 2000s and was attributable in part to China's one-child policy, increased the bargaining leverage of Chinese workers. Agricultural policy changes that induced migrant workers to stay at home may also have contributed to the labor shortage. And some scholars argue that the second generation of migrant workers differed from the previous generation as they were better educated, more acclimated to city life, more media and technology savvy, and hence, more likely to strike (Ngai and Lu 2010).

Political arguments for the acceleration of strikes rest on the government's enactment of a series of pro-labor reforms beginning in 2007 (including the important Labor Contract Law and Dispute Settlement Law), which made workers more aware of their rights (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). These reforms were coupled with an apparent increased governmental tolerance for strikes, suggesting that the political opportunity structure for Chinese workers changed after the passage of these laws (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla 2014).

An institutional argument for the increase in strikes suggests that the cause may well be of the CCP's own making (Friedman 2014). The CCP mandates that the ACFTU have a monopoly over worker representation. As a state-controlled organ, the ACFTU has little legitimacy among workers (it is more often allied with the employer). Chinese workers, facing a representation gap, have no other choice but to engage in autonomous strike action to resolve their issues.

As to whether this increase in strikes will help the creation of a labor movement, pessimistic and optimistic interpretations both exist. On the pessimistic side, Friedman (2014) suggested that autonomous actions by

workers are unlikely to create a durable system of workplace representation as long as the ACFTU retains its monopoly. Friedman and Lee (2010: 521) argued that Chinese strikes are largely independent, with little cross-factory coordination, such that “strikes are fundamentally cellular in the sense that the cells are not combining to form tissues.” Lee (2017) suggested that little evidence supports the claim that the new generation of migrant workers is “more class conscious, politicized, mobilized or empowered” than the older generation. And even if strikes were effective in terms of generating wage increases, they are not successful in generating an employee-elected union, as the ACFTU immediately gets involved to set up an official union in the workplace, thus “absorbing the conflict.”

Optimists see the increases in the number of strikes and the changing causes of strikes as reflecting a new activism among Chinese workers that augurs well for a labor movement in the future. Optimists point to the increasingly “offensive” nature of strikes (in which workers are striking for fundamental worker *interests*), as compared to the earlier pattern of “defensive” strikes (in which workers struck for protection of basic *rights*) (Chan and Ngai 2009; Clarke and Pringle 2009; Butollo and ten Brink 2012). Case studies of individual strikes—such as Nanhai Honda in 2010, Yantian Dockworkers in 2013, the Yu Yuen strike of 2014, followed by Lide and Stella Shoes strikes—provide very optimistic accounts about worker organizing (Cao and Meng 2016; Schmalz, Sommer, and Xu 2016). Writing about the Walmart protests in 2016, Chan (2018: 14) suggested that “in a growing number of incidents around China, workers have begun, on their own, to demand better working conditions and their legal entitlements.”

These optimistic accounts regarding a labor movement may have been fueled by actions of the state to maintain social stability. Important here is the state’s enactment of protective labor legislation, its facilitation of worker education regarding their rights, its toleration of a more open discussion of industrial strife (albeit with a party-approved slant), and its promotion of collective bargaining through its instruction to the ACFTU to increase organizing. Of equal importance is its encouragement of legal mobilization to channel labor conflict into the judicial and semi-judicial system rather than having conflict spill into the streets (Gallagher and Dong 2011; Kuruvilla and Zhang 2016). Optimism also has been generated because state responses to conflict have been “refracted through the interests and capabilities of local agencies,” resulting in a fragmented control system that led to “local authorities often working at cross purposes by simultaneously repressing, co-opting, or neglecting underground union organizing” (Fu 2017b: 453). In addition, toleration of strikes (and the resultant high wage increases) could be explained by the government’s interest in re-balancing the Chinese economy—moving it away from growth by way of exports to growth by way of domestic consumption (Lee 2017). Arguably, these actions increased the political opportunity for Chinese workers.

In sum, the increased contention, the rise in a variety of case studies showing positive returns to strikes in both extrinsic and intrinsic terms, and the mobilizing capacity of workers lead me to argue that, on balance, there was a clear shift to a more optimistic point of view regarding the future of worker voice in China during the 2006 to 2015 period—even if most observers acknowledged that representation in the workplace remained a major problem.

The above discussion of contention and state responses provides context for the contribution of the first article in this issue, “Mobilization without Movement: How the Chinese State ‘Fixed’ Labor Insurgency” by Patricia Chen and Mary Gallagher. The key argument the authors make is that the state has designed two kinds of responses (political “fixes”) that converge in ways to create institutional mechanisms to constrain labor from striking. One of these is a “representational” fix, namely, the granting of monopoly rights to the ACFTU. Workers feel that the ACFTU, as an organ of the party, represents the state’s interests more than workers’ interests. In some sense, this argument is similar to the one made by Friedman (2014) in *Insurgency Trap*, but with a slight twist. In their study of an IBM factory in Guangdong, Chen and Gallagher show how the ACFTU “re-routed” workers’ grievances from a collective action response, with the help of an NGO, to the courts, where the workers were unlikely to succeed in making a claim.

The second response is a “procedural” fix the authors demonstrate through their study of a hospital in Guangzhou. Their argument here is that the legislative system is constructed in ways that support individual rather than collective rights. The workers in this hospital followed the legal procedure to demand that their employer comply with the social insurance law. A two-year battle through the legal system did not result in successful resolution of workers’ grievances, and hence, they had to resort to more radical methods—such as a rooftop protest. The key contribution of the article is that these two political fixes operate in ways that actually *contribute* to labor insurgency, although they are designed to constrain the emergence of sustained labor protest.

### **Collective Bargaining, 2006 to 2015**

The key foci of scholarly attention with respect to collective bargaining during this period has been the state’s interest in fostering the growth of collective bargaining; the quantitative increase in collective contracts; the varying quality of these agreements; and the collective bargaining developments across China and their implications for the future of labor voice.

Kuruvilla and Zhang (2016) suggested that the state fostered the development of collective bargaining through three separate initiatives: a change in the role of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) to make it more responsible for collective bargaining; the

inclusion of provisions for collective negotiations in the new labor laws of the 2007 to 2010 period (discussed above); and, most important, the instructions to the ACFTU to increase union organizing and collective bargaining coverage across the country, with annual organizing targets. An institutional explanation for the state's actions is that it was relying on Webb and Webb's (1897) notions of dealing with labor conflict through both minimum standards legislation and collective bargaining—although the prohibition of an independently chosen union somewhat militates against their objective. A political and social stability explanation is that the government seeks to co-opt conflict and steer it through legal channels through the ACFTU (Gallagher and Dong 2011). An economic explanation is that the state sees wage growth through bargaining as necessary to rebalance the Chinese economy, which could be achieved by collective bargaining, and so it has taken a variety of steps to encourage establishment of mechanisms for regular wage increases in enterprises.

Whatever the state's interests, its encouragement of collective bargaining has been successful in *quantitative* terms, as the number of collective bargaining agreements increased at an annual rate of 19.30%, from 251,794 agreements in 2005 to 6,078,483 agreements in 2010. By 2010, these agreements covered more than 75 million workers (Kuruville and Zhang 2016). Nominal wages also grew at an annual average of 13 to 14% between 2005 and 2012.

In *qualitative* terms, however, most scholars agree that the increase in the quantity of agreements does not mean that collective bargaining is *genuine*. Chan and Hui (2013) classified collective bargaining into two types: party-state led wage bargaining (less genuine) and collective bargaining by riot (more genuine since it results from strikes and protests). Kuruville and Zhang (2016) classified Chinese collective bargaining along two dimensions: centralized–decentralized and authentic–inauthentic. They suggested that the vast majority of collective bargaining agreements are decentralized to the company level and are largely inauthentic. Such agreements are usually made between the ACFTU and the management, with little or no participation by workers, who most likely are not even aware that they are represented by the union.

Friedman and Kuruville (2015) argued that the Chinese state is taking an experimental, gradualist, and decentralized approach to collective bargaining—hence the variation observed across provinces. The central state promotes or allows local experimentation in a number of ways. Local governments may involve themselves in collective bargaining in order to raise wages or to provide incentives to firms to use collective bargaining more regularly—or to encourage collective bargaining because it may prevent strikes and the general instability that ensues as a result of public protests. Several provinces have enacted detailed regulations that go above and beyond national-level collective bargaining regulations. Recently, Guangdong province enacted bargaining regulations that not only obligate employers to bargain, but even more far reaching, allow, but not require, the direct election of worker representatives by workers.

An increase in case study evidence that shows workers do gain from collective bargaining (even if autonomous bargaining started by workers themselves gets taken over or “routinized” by ACFTU, e.g., establishing a ACFTU-controlled union) has fueled some optimism regarding the future. This evidence is best epitomized by Froissart’s studies of “worker-led collective bargaining”—a type of authentic bargaining—in which “Chinese workers are de facto able to lead true autonomous collective bargaining, even if such bargaining is not yet institutionalized” (2018: 24).

The tinge of optimism is clearly evident in the second article in this issue, “Taming Labor: Workers’ Struggles, Workplace Unionism, and Collective Bargaining on a Chinese Waterfront” by Tim Pringle and Quan Meng, which illustrates both sides of the discussion above. In a study of worker operators at the Yantian International Container Terminal in China, one of China’s largest ports, the authors show how the structural power of crane operators (who went on strike several times in 2007) resulted in the establishment, with the intervention of the district union, of annual collective bargaining. The article highlights the interaction between workers with high levels of structural power and the official union, which wanted to ensure that it developed some degree of legitimacy from the perspective of *both* workers and the CCP. The story is an interesting and complex one that ultimately shows how the structural power of workers was bent into an associational power by the official union in ways in which workers’ interests were represented reasonably well and the official union gained some legitimacy. Although this case represents an overall positive outcome, the nature of the work (dockworkers have always had greater bargaining power in most countries) and the changing political landscape since 2015 inhibit the generalizability of the findings.

### **The Role of NGOs, 2006 to 2015**

Because the ACFTU is not viewed as a legitimate representative by most Chinese workers, a number of NGOs (increasingly called labor NGOs or LNGOs) attempt to play a role in filling the representation void. The scholarship regarding the effects of NGOs on labor issues is contentious and growing, but increasingly evidences a clear sense of optimism.

Early research on LNGOs was pessimistic regarding their effectiveness, with some findings highlighting their difficulties in functioning in the grey zone of inconsistent state policy of both repression and accommodation (Lee and Shen 2011; Xu 2013; Chen and Yang 2017; Fu 2017b; Chan 2018). Many researchers saw NGOs as inhibiting the development of collective consciousness and a labor movement in China (e.g., Franceschini 2014), and Lee and Shen (2011: 173) referred to them as “anti-solidarity machines” in that they focus on helping channel individual workers through the legal system, rather than developing a collective consciousness.

Later research on LNGOs by Fu (2017a) highlighted the notion of disguised collective action, in which LNGOs act as unconventional mobilizing

structures by coaching aggrieved workers to make individual rights claims without engaging in collective protests. The argument is that “atomized” actions by individual workers do not elicit a harsh response from the state, and the pedagogical processes of disguised collective action fosters collective consciousness.

More recently, a growing number of scholars argue that LNGOs truly fill the gap between workers’ demands for collective bargaining in the absence of effective union representation. Chen and Yang suggested that the emergence of “movement-oriented LNGOs” calls into question commonly held views regarding them and that “some LNGOs have become surprisingly vocal in support of workers’ collective activism and have indeed become advocates of the labour movement” (2017: 4). Froissart (2018) went a step further, suggesting that some LNGOs (especially those led by former workers) have become a catalyst for collective action in ways that enable workers to successfully challenge employers, official unions, and local authorities. This is an argument shared by both Becker (2014) and Fu (2017a). Even Lee, who was critical of NGOs when writing about them as anti-solidarity machines in 2011, has softened her stance when writing about them in 2018. She noted that in the Pearl River Delta, “NGO activists have accumulated almost two decades of organizational experience and legal knowledge, they have formed networks of information exchange and training workshops amongst themselves” and that “NGOs have accumulated social capital among workers, something that unions lack” (Lee 2017: 18). Consistent with Froissart’s description, Pringle (2017) referred to LNGOs as *solidarity machines*. Chan (2018) suggested that workers, once dependent on LNGOs, are beginning to move on and act more autonomously when their interests diverge from those of LNGOs. Thus, evidence clearly supports my argument that a stronger flavor of optimism was developing in and around 2015 to 2016 regarding the potential of LNGOs to make a difference and for worker activism generally.

Other recent research has focused specifically on the LNGO methodology—that is, how NGOs work, what they do to mobilize workers, and the various ways they perform union-like functions (Chen and Yang 2017; Fu 2018). The third article in this issue, “Overcoming Collective Action Problems Facing Chinese Workers: Lessons from Four Protests against Walmart” by Chunyun Li and Mingwei Liu, extends this stream of research through its detailed study of the activities and strategies of LNGOs in strikes against the closures of Walmart stores in China. Focusing on two of the four strikes that were relatively prolonged and sustained (the Changde protest lasted three months), the authors highlight the role of two types of activists in devising strategies for sustained collective action: activist workers and external labor activists. Like Chen and Yang (2017), they focus on how workers became workplace representatives, but go further in delineating the various mobilizing strategies employed by these representatives, such as the employment of a legal framing, creating social pressure to gain

commitment, and the use of social media to facilitate internal coordination and communication. In this, the representatives were supported by external labor activists who focused on developing the strategic capacity of workers. Li and Liu conclude that workplace-based protest leadership has started to emerge in China, and they see a brighter future for worker-led collective bargaining. Their research draws on fieldwork conducted in 2014.

### **Chinese Industrial Relations, 2015 to the Present: Toward a Renewed Pessimism**

I base the claim that we have now entered a period of renewed pessimism in China labor scholarship on three arguments. The first is that the state is moving firmly to establish party control over all aspects of society; the second is that the state has begun a process of repression of labor activism generally and LNGOs in particular; and third, that the combined effect of these two actions is causing a chilling effect on current and *future* labor scholarship in China. The evidence to support these arguments primarily draws on contemporary events, newspaper reports, and interviews, given the relative void in scholarly research on labor after 2016. Much of the scholarly work on labor published after 2016, including Fu (2017a, 2017b) and Gallagher (2017), was based on fieldwork that took place before the clampdown.

If it was difficult to discern which of the Chinese state's (both national and local level) interests were at play in its varied responses to strikes, its encouragement of collective bargaining, and its varied tolerance of NGO activity during the 2006 to 2015 period, the post-2015 period leaves us in no such doubt about state interests. Much of the state's action in the labor sphere clearly is linked to its interest in political and social stability and is articulated through a centralization of power in ways that seek to firmly re-establish party control over all aspects of society. This approach is a significant departure from the earlier Hu-Wen regime (Fu and Distelhorst 2018).

Franceschini and Nesossi (2018: 121) suggested there has been "an escalation in the tension between the party-state and NGOs and a shift to more 'sophisticated' methods of repression and control" after 2015. A series of laws has been designed to control NGOs. In July 2015, a state security law allowed actions against labor NGOs if they entered factories during strikes (Xu and Schmalz 2017). In 2016, China enacted the new "charity law," establishing a comprehensive framework for the government's administration of the social sector. Previously, charities, NGOs, and other civil society groups had operated in a "quasi legal environment where enforcement was unpredictable or inconsistent and this legal uncertainty had provided a degree of operational freedom" (Kaja and Stratford 2016: 2). New measures include the requirement of registration, rules for fund-raising platforms and organizations, rules regarding the filing of charitable trusts, and a variety of rules regarding enforcement. In January 2017, a new law to regulate

foreign NGOs required them to register with the Ministry of Public Security and to meet stringent registration and reporting guidelines. A new ad campaign in 2018 for National Security Education Day explicitly targeted foreign organizations supporting Chinese LNGOs—which are portrayed in the campaign as riling up workers with “western theories of unions” (ChinaFile 2018).<sup>3</sup> An internal CCP document (called Document Number 9 as it was ninth in a series of communiques within the party by the party general office)<sup>4</sup> stated, “Advocates of civil society want to squeeze the party out of leadership of the masses at the local level, even setting the party against the masses, to the point that their advocacy is becoming a serious form of political opposition” (ChinaFile 2013).

Several developments exemplify the government’s new hard line against LNGOs and labor activism generally. In July 2015, the government arrested several lawyers and activists and charged them with the crime of collusion with “hostile foreign forces” (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018: 122; Lee 2017). In May 2015, government officials arrested women activists in some cities as they sought to hand out leaflets regarding sexual harassment in public transport (reported in Chan 2018). In December 2015, the government jailed five staff members of various LNGOs in Guangdong. A particularly high-profile arrest was that of Zeng Feiyang, director of the Panyu Migrant Workers Center in Guangzhou, one of the more daring of the movement-oriented LNGOs. Although he received a suspended sentence for “disturbing the public order,” he was arrested (along with three of his staff) for helping workers protest in a dispute that was eventually settled by collective bargaining (Chan 2018: 8). Labor activist Lu Shaoming received a four-year prison sentence for “inciting subversion of state power” (China Labour Bulletin 2017). In sum, these crackdowns appear to differ significantly from previous methods of repression of NGOs in that they were nationally televised and relied on legal means provided by the new laws, rather than the traditional extralegal methods of intimidation of NGOs (Franceschini and Nesossi 2018). These crackdowns also disrupt the “alliances with local authorities at the local level” that LNGOs must forge to continue their work (Froissart 2018: 34).

The state’s macro-economic interests may add a pessimistic tinge to the future of labor relations as well. China is settling into a period of lower growth rates, and Lee (2017) suggested that the labor contract law (enacted in 2007 and the “backbone” of protective labor legislation and collective bargaining during the 2006 to 2015 period) is under attack. Moreover, the state has issued explicit directives in several provinces to freeze or restrain minimum wage growth; consequently, a noticeable flattening of wage growth has occurred in several cities (China Labour Bulletin 2015). These developments suggest that the prospects for the growth in authentic

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<sup>3</sup>See <http://www.chinafile.com/ngo/latest/government-cartoon-portrays-foreign-ngos-national-security-concern>.

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>. An English translation was published by US-based *Mingjing* Magazine in 2013.

collective bargaining are dim. Although strikes show signs of a rebound in 2018 (after declining for two years), governmental efforts to suppress strikes and protests have intensified, as best exemplified by a worker interviewed after a recent strike on May 1, 2018.

Because I forwarded a post about a worker strike on May 1 yesterday, the Changsha Ministry of State Security collected all possible information about me within a day, including my address, telephone number, work unit and more. Two hours ago they came to my workplace and demanded that I come to the police station and explain myself. (Jiangsong 2018)

The chilling effect on LNGOs and worker activism also is reflected in Chinese labor scholarship, as evidenced in a series of recent events. Lü Yuyu, a former migrant worker who documented mass protests in China, was sentenced to four years in prison for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (Wong and Chen 2017). His work was an important resource for researchers, reporters, and NGOs writing about Chinese labor. The government has closed two well-known academic centers that focused on labor research, at Sun Yat Sen University in Guangzhou and at Beijing Normal University. The former center had expanded considerably and was slated to become an independent labor school when it was shut down. The Ministry of Education has frozen the expansion of labor relations programs in Chinese universities at a time when most academic programs are growing. At one university, the government gave a professor who was teaching labor relations and labor issues a list of “approved” readings from which she could organize her class lectures. Senior faculty in some sociology departments in China have told their junior colleagues not to do research on labor issues.

Evidence of the narrowing of the political space for labor scholarship also can be seen in heightened self-censorship. For instance, the Chinese Labor Relations Association’s annual themes from 2009 to 2014 focused on collective labor disputes resolution, collective labor relations regulation, labor relations transformation, and constructing the discipline of labor relations. By contrast, its 2015 theme was “grounding the ideas and spirits of the central government and constructing harmonious labor relations,” and the 2018 meeting theme was “constructing harmonious labor relations in the new era.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a major outlet for industrial relations studies—*Human Resources Development of China*—which formerly published many articles on strikes, collective bargaining, union reforms, and labor NGOs, has, since 2015, gradually reduced papers on these topics to publish more articles on human resource management and organizational behavior topics.

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<sup>5</sup>The association’s annual meeting in 2016 was cancelled, in part due to government restrictions. The 2017 theme focused on labor relations in the internet economy. The Chinese Labor Relations Association is a sub-association of the Chinese Research Association of Human Resource Development, which in turn has a very simple page on the *Journal of Chinese Human Resource Development* website. See <http://www.hrdchina.org/aboutus.asp>.

Moreover, ACFTU's flagship magazine *China Workers*, which formerly published many local union innovations to represent workers as well as pro-labor comments on strikes, has been transferred to a publishing house under a new editor to heed the dominant discourse. I might argue further that here may be a general constriction in the space for all kinds of academic research that might threaten the regime, not solely in the labor arena. This threat can be seen in the recent case of Cambridge University Press (CUP), in which the Chinese government asked the Press to censor articles from the respected journal *China Quarterly*. CUP initially agreed, but retracted after an international protest by scholars worldwide.

Increasingly, young China-based scholars feel there is little dividend in pursuing research in labor activism and labor relations. In 2017, a visiting student at a Chinese university submitted a paper on migrant workers' class consciousness to a sociology journal in China, but the editor responded that the topic of working-class consciousness is not acceptable in China today. In October 2017, I participated in a research conference (held in the United States) of young China-based labor scholars from various disciplines. They seemed to be in an existential crisis, all wondering how they could continue to do labor-related research and make academic careers out of studying labor in China when publishing articles on labor issues could be dangerous. A key concern was what to study, as studying activism and strikes does not seem possible any longer.

The chilling effect appears to have extended to even labor scholars who study China labor issues from outside of China (whether the scholars are Chinese or not). At my university, a doctoral student admitted that she has shifted her plan of study from Chinese labor to economic sociology as she sees a diminishing possibility of doing research on labor in China. One established China labor scholar I know is considering developing expertise in labor issues in other Asian countries, and another I interviewed suggested "there is nothing coming out of China these days regarding labor. . . . no one seems to know anything." These recent developments help explain my pessimistic take on the future for Chinese labor scholarship.

The chill in NGO activity and the decline in labor scholarship does not necessarily mean that the underlying issues identified in earlier rounds of research have been resolved or that workers have become more quiescent. Strikes have resumed their upward trend in the first quarter of 2018, and signs of increased sophistication in worker actions are evident in the recent coordinated wage campaign by crane operators in a number of cities and provinces on May 1, 2018.<sup>6</sup> So the chilling effect on labor researchers and NGOs may be blinding the scholarly community with regard to the

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<sup>6</sup>See <http://www.clb.org.hk/content/tower-crane-operators-across-china-organise-labour-day-strike-over-low-pay>. Some reports assert that strikes have taken place in 27 cities in up to 18 provinces. The workers organized online through closed groups on instant messaging apps such as QQ to discuss strategies and make announcements.

continuity that exists in labor protests. Empirical research to confirm this continuity, however, is likely to be increasingly difficult.

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