CHAPTER 9

Assessing Working-Class Power in Postsocialist China

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Introduction

In this twenty-first-century ‘golden era’ that some have compared favourably to China’s rise to a leader in the world economy from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century,¹ social disparity and urban-rural inequality deepens as China transitions from its position as one of the world’s most egalitarian societies (during the period of state socialism from the 1950s through the 1970s) to one with income inequality on a scale approximating that of the United States.² With a shift in manufacturing from the developed countries of North America, Europe, and East Asia to the emerging economies, China has become not only the workshop of the world, but also the epicentre of labour unrest. Yet even as the size and complexity of China’s working class grows, and social protest proliferates, the language of class has largely disappeared from mainstream Chinese discourse.³ This labour ethnography of post-socialist China shares the intellectual vision and collective endeavour of leftist scholars. An analysis of Chinese labour politics will enrich the development of Global Labour History, which seeks to advance an interdisciplinary and transcontinental approach to explain the transformation of labour relations, the processes of working-class formation and the emergence of workers’ movements in a comparative context.⁴

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¹ Li 2008; Arrighi 2009; Hung 2009.
² Lee and Selden 2008; Davis and Wang 2009.
³ For a few exceptions to depoliticising China, see Wang 2003; Anagnost 2008; Pun and Chan 2008; Lin 2013; Goodman 2014.
⁴ Van der Linden 2008.
Contemporary Chinese labour conditions are heavily shaped by the state within the global production system. Since the late 1970s under the Open Door Policy, the re-emergence of labour markets has transformed the economy in step with Chinese and international investment, and later the privatisation of numerous socialist state enterprises. Employment in China’s manufacturing sector (relative to agriculture and the service industry) reached an unprecedented 15 percent of the economically active population in the mid-1990s. The percentage would have been even higher if the other 8 to 14 percent of those employed in uncategorised industries were added. The increase in industrial workers was mainly drawn from the hundreds of millions of rural migrants who, in the wake of de-collectivisation, were absorbed into booming township and village enterprises and export-oriented privately-owned factories, along with state and collective enterprises. By 2014, the total number of employed people across mainland China reached 773 million, making some 25 percent of the 3.1 billion working population worldwide. The fundamental labour rights of many, however, remain largely unprotected.

This chapter discusses the lives and collective struggles of Chinese industrial workers against the intensification of contradictions among labour, capital and the state. By contrast, scholars under dual pressure from the state and academic institutions have shunned ‘class analysis’ and defined away labour issues as those of ‘mobility, migration, and stratification’. In the following sections, I review the radical historical changes in Chinese society, particularly the diversification of ownership and the introduction of capitalist modes of labour control in the context of transnational production. This is followed by an inside look into workers’ living and working experiences through workers’ literature (such as songs and poems) and scholarly research. At times of crisis, workers with higher consciousness have taken various forms of resistance to defend their rights and interests. Despite successive legal reforms, including the recent trade-union reforms, the state-labour relationship remains contentious.

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5 Gallagher 2005; Andreas 2012; So 2013; Chan 2015.
6 Evans and Staveteig 2009, p. 78.
7 Huang 2008.
10 Lee and Shen 2009, p. 110.