

THE TRANSFORMATION OF LABOR RELATIONS IN CHINA'S EMERGING MARKET ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

The economic reforms in China have set in motion a process of change that is transforming Chinese society and politics in fundamental ways. Gradual reforms in China often lead critics to argue that little substantive change has actually occurred with respect to labor relations in China. However, the transformation of labor relations in reform-era China has been fundamental and deep, and this transformation plays a crucial role in the “quiet revolution” currently underway in the Chinese economy and in society at large. From the changes in the workplace to the new institutional contexts in which firms are situated, the current position of labor in China marks a radical break from the past. An explanation of these changes must strive to integrate three levels of analysis. First, state level institutional changes, led by reform-minded leaders, have driven this process forward. Second, a rights-based labor regime is emerging in factories through on-the-ground pressure from foreign investors. Third, at the individual level, workers are no longer tied to their workplaces; fluid labor markets, and opportunities elsewhere, afford workers a bargaining power that was previously impossible in China. The emergence of a rule of law society in general provides a context within which changing labor relations in China are situated.

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“Doesn’t a work unit have to heed national law? We want an explanation. We are just protecting our rights.”

Plaintiff in labor dispute, April 1998¹

INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, a quiet revolution has been taking place in the Chinese economy. It is a revolution that is not hidden from China scholars and business leaders, but it is one to which policy makers in the U.S. have been largely oblivious. In China today, workers experience much greater freedom, much more protection from capricious authoritarian rule, and many more avenues for recourse against unfair labor practices. Since the economic reforms began, the Chinese government has been gradually building the scaffolding upon which rational and fair labor practices rest. By the end of the 1980s, Chinese workplaces had begun adopting the types of systems and structures that are most often found in workplaces of advanced capitalist economies. Chinese workers and citizens today experience the greatest sense of freedom since the founding of the PRC. These changes in labor relations have important implications for the emergence of a democratic society in China.

In my past work, I have focused on two forces that have driven these changes forward. The first feature of the Chinese economy upon which I focused is the institutional hierarchy of the former command economy. I have argued that this system has had profound implications for the ways that firms experience the reform era, and I have shown this to be the case empirically across a number of different economic and social indicators. Second, I argued that the role of foreign investment has played a crucial role in the changes sweeping across Chinese firms. Foreign investment and, in particular, joint ventures with large multinational firms have played a fundamental role in the type of capitalism that is currently emerging in China. While these institutional forces have been crucial for the process of economic reform in China, the problem with this approach is that I have told only a partial story. I have omitted several of the crucial factors that allow us a fuller understanding of these processes of change. Where I have focused on firm level forces of change, a broader understanding of the economic reforms in transforming socialist economies must, at the very least, also account for the activities of elites and the changes in labor markets. In other words, understanding the forces shaping Chinese capitalism must begin with an understanding of the processes that drive market formation and individual level economic behavior.

Concretely, three critical factors are shaping the structure of labor relations in China today. First, state level institutional changes have laid the backdrop

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