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Workers and Changes in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness

Manfred Elfstrom

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 232 pp., ISBN: 9781108831109, \$99.00

In this compelling book, Manfred Elfstrom portrays a uniquely comprehensive and vivid picture of dynamic changes in contemporary industrial relations in China. Elfstrom is a political science scholar who has studied Chinese labour unrest for almost ten years since the time of his doctoral studies. Here, his focus lies with worker resistance and policy responses and he analyses these using a process-oriented approach based on a combination of extensive fieldwork and rich data analysis. Elfstrom's main argument is that different forms of worker resistance have generated different models of control in different regions. They have also increased the state's repressive and responsive capacities, which have grown in conflict with one another in a manner that will not be sustainable in the long term. In making this argument, Elfstrom draws on a huge number of documents and statistics and a wide range of interviews with many difficult-to-access subjects. He also demonstrates a deep understanding of Chinese economy, society and politics. Notwithstanding a couple of minor weaknesses, which I detail below, the resulting book is a must-read for anyone who wants to gain a better understanding of Chinese labour unrest, industrial relations and government.

The book has eight chapters. It begins with a short introduction of the book's approach, main content, methodology and data sources. The second chapter then categorises three different forms of worker resistance from low to high in terms of their impacts on authorities regarding the aspects of tactics, demands and organisations. He designates these three forms as 'contained', 'boundary-spanning' and 'transgressive'. He explains that the latter two forms are on the rise in certain parts of China and correlates the rise with what he calls 'recipes of resistance', which identify positive variables including the kind of sector and the worker demographic.

Chapters two to six examine how worker resistance exerts pressure on authorities; what distinct regional modes of control are generated; and, finally, whether any national trends can be identified. The analysis begins with decisions made by individual local officials concerning China's contentious workplaces. Elfstrom characterises these officials as either bureaucratic strivers or muddlers, who are driven by the cadre promotion system which sets social stability as one benchmark. Constructing case studies of two regions of China that are quite similar in nature, Jiangsu's portion of the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) and Guangdong's portion of the Pearl River Delta (PRD), the author identifies two contrasting regional models of control: orthodox and risk-taking. Because of the more high-tech industry and local workers in Jiangsu, resistance is low level and generally ranges from contained to boundary-spanning. This allows the government to take an orthodox approach, pre-empting conflict as much as possible, exercising caution in respect of reform of labour laws and trade unions, nudging capital and labour through the use of quiet incentives and punishments and isolating dangerous NGOs. In Guangdong, the predominance of light industry and the large density of migrant workers results in a high level of worker resistance generally ranging from boundary-spanning to outright transgressive. Consequently, the government adopts a risk-taking control approach characterised by experimental changes to labour laws and trade unions, and reactionary crackdowns on recalcitrant employers, labour activists and strikers. By matching his *China Strike* dataset and the official number of formally adjudicated employment disputes with spending on the People's Armed Police and the outcomes of formally adjudicated employment disputes data, the author further identifies that the national trend of managing industrial relations in China is to increase both the repressive and the responsive capacities of the state. Although reverse causality and complications occur on some occasions, the author emphasises that this doesn't undermine his argument that worker resistance fundamentally shapes the development by government of its capacities in these different and conflicting ways.

An important question discussed from a different perspective in the seventh chapter is whether the role of elite politics at different levels undermines the author's main argument. The author examines

two former leaders at the regional level in the city of Chongqing. Both had reputations for shaking up politics and, in the face of only moderate worker resistance, paid little attention to labour issues. When one of the two was reassigned to the more conflict-ridden Guangdong Province, however, he initiated many labour reforms. The current highly intolerant approach of the Xi administration to labour policies is also said to prove that regardless of variation in administrations' political openness, cross-administration continues to rely on repressive and responsive capacities as shaped by workers' actions: the level and nature of workers' resistance. Across time and space, administrations always rely on repressive *and* responsive capacities to deal with workers' resistance, though the degree of trade-off may vary.

Somewhat contrary to a pessimistic view of the future of worker resistance in China, focused on the Chinese government's adaptability to build the two forms of capacities and perfect the machinery of control, the author notes in conclusion that 'labour unrest is likely to instead end up warping the state over the long haul, in the sense that authorities will be forced into spiralling suboptimal choices'(p. 151).As other forms of capacity-building are neglected, capital is alienated and labour dissatisfied, and it becomes difficult to coordinate the two capacities. Elfstrom suggests further that Chinese experience may hold lessons for other 'post-socialist state authoritarian regimes', as he puts it.

One minor weakness of this book lies with the choice of two cities, selected for their essential similarities, in order to allow for comparison of the author's proposed 'recipes of resistance'. As the author states: 'the PRD represents a relatively small sliver of the country, and the YRD stands in for a fairly wide, average swath of places' (p.148-49). Whether they can be understood to be representative of China as a whole is in doubt, however, given that both the PRD and YRD are the most developed regions, ranking top in China for attracting migrant workers. Ideally, the author would have included more information about resistance and governance in other regions in his "risk-taking control" chapter, and not only the few examples contained in the conclusion, which he

intends to demonstrate the representativeness of YRD in particular. Another minor criticism is that there is a small data 'match gap' between the forms of resistance and PRD's crackdown governance on labour activists and strikers in Chapter five, which the former concluded from *China Strike* dataset between 2003 and 2012 and the latter concluded mostly after 2015, in different administrations, such that the correlation becomes less strong. All that said, these minor weaknesses do not detract from the fact that the author has produced a profound book providing a fresh perspective on bottom-up change in China over the past ten years. It's a fascinating and highly informative read and I found it difficult to put down.

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