



Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness. (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Workers and Change in China

A Conversation with Manfred Elfstrom

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In his new book, *Workers and Change in China: Resistance, Repression, Responsiveness* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), Manfred Elfstrom delves into the paradox that sees the Chinese Party-State addressing workers' grievances while coming down increasingly hard on civil society groups and individual activists promoting labour rights. Examining both the causes and the consequences of protest through extensive fieldwork and statistical analysis, Elfstrom explores the daily evolution of autocratic rule, highlighting how pressure from the grassroots can translate into political change even in the most dire circumstances.

Ivan Franceschini: The past decade has seen a notable shift in the global discourse of Chinese labour. In the book, you mention that Chinese workers, 'once an object of foreign pity, the focus of sweatshop exposés and anguished editorials about the dangers of free trade ... gradually came to be seen in some circles as inspired militants worthy of emulation'. This change of narrative was most apparent around 2010, when the Nanhai Honda Strike and the Foxconn suicides made headlines all over the world. The new narrative, centred on the idea of the 'awakening' of the Chinese working class, remained somewhat dominant for the first half of the decade, at least until the crackdown on labour nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) of late 2015. In hindsight, what do you think was the reason behind this discursive shift, and how much of the optimism of those years was warranted?

Manfred Elfstrom: That sentence you quoted sums up the arc of my own experience with the workers' movement in China, going back further than just the past decade. I first came into contact with Chinese labour issues in the early 2000s, when I was involved in a very minor way in campus anti-sweatshop activism. At that time, workers in China really were thought of first and foremost as victims, at least by activists abroad. Later on, I interned with, and then briefly worked for, China Labor Watch, which investigates factories in China for labour law violations. The organisation brought media attention to some remarkable acts of worker resistance, but the focus was still on uncovering abuses and pressuring companies. Then, by the time of the Honda strike, I was working with Chinese grassroots labour NGOs and got caught up in the general excitement sparked by that mobilisation. I helped some Chinese activists

join international gatherings, and organisers from other parts of the world were very interested to hear what they had to say. Now, pessimism is pervasive and the global labour movement has moved on. China is seen as a hopelessly repressive place and people are focusing on problems closer to home. The discursive shift has indeed been big.

In general, this change in rhetoric has tracked what has been happening on the ground in China. Journalists, academics, and campaigners have not been ‘wrong’. However, there has always been a slight disjuncture between the general perception of where Chinese workers are and where the movement has actually stood. For instance, there were plenty of strikes and protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s—and not just by laid-off state-owned enterprise employees, but migrant workers, too. And some of these confrontations featured demands that went beyond minimal legal guarantees, even though such demands would become much more common later. Anita Chan documented some of this already in her 2001 volume, *China’s Workers Under Assault*. I start my book with a description of the Stella shoe factory protest of 2004. It involved a whole host of issues! For a period, Chinese labour NGOs were understood by many academics to be cautious, even conservative, groups. Then, scholars pointed to the emergence of what Chen Feng and Yang Xuehui call ‘movement-oriented labour NGOs’ that engage in informal collective bargaining. But NGOs had long been doing this kind of thing—just covertly. Perhaps everyone’s excitement following the Honda strike was overblown. As Eli Friedman has argued, because the Chinese state never allowed workers an institutional vehicle to lock in their voice at the factory level, much less nationally, their gains were never going to be as big as they might otherwise have been. But perhaps today’s pessimism is also exaggerated. Although labour NGOs have been severely repressed, strikes continue at a high level. *China Labour Bulletin (CLB)* recorded nearly 800 incidents in 2020. That is a lot by global standards, and *CLB* is only capturing a fraction of the total number. Moreover, when the Chinese Government is pushed, along with crackdowns, it responds with concessions here and there, even in this more hostile climate. The dance thus continues.

IF: In the book, you discuss some ‘recipes for resistance’. Can you explain what you mean by that?

ME: There is a rich body of academic literature analysing the reasons Chinese workers engage in collective action and why they prefer certain tactics over others. My book does not attempt to put forward another big theory in this regard. Instead, I use official statistics concerning formally

adjudicated labour disputes and my own dataset of strikes, protests, and riots between 2004 and 2012 to try to identify which factors tend to be correlated with what I describe as ‘contained’ versus ‘transgressive’ and ‘boundary-spanning’ activism. By ‘contained’, I mean relying mainly on litigation and petitioning, raising demands concerning basic labour standards, and organising via narrow workplace networks; by ‘transgressive’, I mean well-disciplined or cross-worksites strikes, demands relating to wage increases in excess of legal minimums or calls for things like union reforms, and organising that involves movement-oriented NGOs and other associations; and, finally, by ‘boundary-spanning’, something in between—more routine strikes, protests, and riots, wage demands, and drawing on the services of legally oriented NGOs. Here, I am borrowing categories of dissent established by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001), as well as the work of Kevin O’Brien. In general, I find that more capital-intensive industries with more high-skilled jobs are correlated with more contained activism, whereas light industry, construction, and transport are correlated with transgressive and boundary-spanning activism. And in contrast to scholarship from the early 2000s, I find that migrant worker density in a given area also correlates with organising taking a more transgressive and boundary-spanning form. I treat these factors as together forming a series of ‘recipes for resistance’ in the sense that you can swap out different ingredients—migrants can be present but not light industry, for instance—and arrive at the same outcome. In other words, beyond, I suppose, taking a somewhat materialist approach, I am not putting forward a mono-causal explanation for Chinese labour unrest. I am just trying to document the various things that tend to come together in a variety of configurations where unrest is present. My main interest in the book, though, is answering a different question: what effect has all this activism actually had? But you have to map out the possible causes of militancy in at least a cursory way before you can begin to talk about its consequences.

IF: One of the greatest contributions of your book is this focus on how workers in China contribute to shaping government policy. How do they manage to do that?

ME: Workers are forcing the government to develop in two contradictory directions at once: towards increased repressive capacity and increased responsive capacity. At a regional level, the different forms that resistance takes result in what I call different ‘regional models of control’. Where resistance remains largely contained or, at most, boundary-spanning, you see authorities adopting an orthodox approach that combines pre-emption of worker mobilisation, caution when it comes

to labour law and the programming of the official trade union—why rock the boat policywise and risk introducing disorder when things are already going well?—and subtle nudging to keep both labour and capital in line. In contrast, where resistance ranges from boundary-spanning to outright transgressive, authorities adopt a risk-taking approach that involves giving up on pre-empting everything and instead focusing on experimenting with novel, somewhat pro-worker policies, while coming down harshly on labour organisers and ordinary striking workers alike. I illustrate these models with case studies of Jiangsu's portion of the Yangtze River Delta (orthodoxy) and Guangdong's portion of the Pearl River Delta (risk-taking). More broadly, I use statistics to provide evidence that more strikes, protests, and riots are associated with more spending on the paramilitary People's Armed Police (repressive capacity) and more pro-worker or split decisions in mediation, arbitration, and court (responsive capacity).

If the spark for all this comes from what workers are doing (or not doing), I argue that these developments are carried through the system by the bureaucratic incentives for officials to demonstrate to their superiors that they are doing something about unrest. This raises the question of whether individual officials might have an outsized influence on the state's reaction to unrest, both locally and nationally. Could this all just be an issue of who is in power where, rather than labour's actions? However, I use a brief study of Chongqing and its successive leaders, Wang Yang and Bo Xilai, to argue that elite politics only matter marginally. Some politicians may be more or less reformist or reactionary by nature, but whether they devote their attention to labour issues *per se*, rather than other items on their agenda, comes down to the level of unrest in their jurisdictions. Workers are ultimately the ones driving alterations in Chinese industrial relations, as well as, to some degree, society at large, even if the change to date has been of an ambiguous kind. In social science terms, labour is the key 'independent variable'.

IF: Your book is a call to move beyond the 'transitology' and 'resilience' approaches that have dominated scholarship on authoritarian regimes since the end of the Cold War. The 'transitology' paradigm treated dictatorships as only a way station on the road to democracy, while 'resilience' shifts the attention to the variety of mechanisms that autocrats possess for maintaining control. What are the shortcomings of those approaches and how do you overcome them?

ME: The transitology approach has been pilloried for a while now, so I do not see a lot of benefit in piling on the existing criticism. Buoyed by the rapid expansion of liberal democratic institutions after the Cold War, transitology assumed that

authoritarianism anywhere was, essentially, temporary. A scholar's task, then—to exaggerate a bit—was simply comparing and contrasting different forms of transitions. The problem was, of course, that many non-democracies continued their non-democratic ways and many new democracies reverted to different degrees of authoritarianism. Today's contrasting focus on the sources of authoritarian resilience has yielded many valuable insights, including when it comes to China. We have learned, for instance, how phenomena like partial rule of law, controlled urbanisation, unrepresentative legislatures, selective toleration of protest, and massive but still incomplete censorship bolster Chinese Communist Party rule. However, there is a danger of this form of analysis going too far. Every seeming 'bug' in the system comes to be treated as a 'feature' waiting to be discovered and explained. The Party appears as a master puppeteer. And, as a consequence, our picture of China and countries like it becomes static.

In my book, I try to sketch out a more dynamic process, one in which the state is constantly reacting to threats from below, and its reactions in turn constrain its options for future reactions, even as those reactions also hem in activists. I acknowledge that the Chinese Government is remarkably adaptable. But I argue that some of its adaptations should be thought of as warping state development over the long term. Money spent on public security is money not spent on social services, for example. Jennifer Pan makes a similar point in *Welfare for Autocrats* (2020), her new book on China's welfare system, in which she shows that the government's growing emphasis on political stability above all else has led *di bao* payments to be doled out on a political basis, thereby spurring protests by those who feel they are deserving of the payments based on their income but have nonetheless been denied them. Issues like this are not necessarily fatal flaws for the government. But they suggest that authorities are not fully in control and that the state is evolving in a contradictory manner. My book is not entirely upbeat or downbeat about Chinese workers' prospects. What it argues is that the situation is very much in flux and driven by bottom-up pressures more than anything else. ■

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