

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

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What are workers doing to change their lives and what are the impacts of labor contention on contemporary Chinese politics? In *Workers and Change in China*, Manfred Elfstrom adopts a process-oriented approach to analyze the dynamism of governance under the previous leadership of Hu Jintao and the current administration of Xi Jinping. Conducting 152 interviews, along with compiling an online dataset with 1,471 strikes, protests and riots,ⁱ he shows the changing relationship among workers, managers and the state. At the subnational level, he looked at key factors like the composition of industrial sectors and worker demographics when explaining contrasting patterns of grassroots resistance and government reactions. His main argument is that “the state had developed a greater capacity for repression *and* a greater capacity for responsiveness” to tame the rising tide of unrest all over the country (p. 3).

During the late 1990s and 2000s, the power of official trade union and related institutions, such as Staff and Workers’ Representative Congresses, declined vis-à-vis management in restructured state-owned enterprises. Managers enjoyed great autonomy to hire and fire employees to cut costs and to raise labor productivity in a more competitive market environment. In the non-state sector where trade unions were set up, they often served employers’ needs instead of negotiating on workers’ behalf. With the growth of private and foreign-invested firms, rural migrants were increasingly recruited to fuel domestic and export-oriented production. Today, despite the relaxation of decades-old household registration policy, Chinese internal migrants in their hundreds of millions are still barred from accessing the same full citizenship rights as their local counterparts (such as urban permanent residence and public school attendance for their children). Notwithstanding the discourse of the rule of law and inclusive urbanization, exploitation of vulnerable workers is rampant.

The author explains that various forms of worker resistance can be “distinguished by the varying level of pressure that they bring to bear on the state” (p. 21). Chinese workers and their supporters are engaging in contained, boundary-spanning or transgressive contention, while three approaches are sometimes combined to strengthen grassroots pressure. “Contained resistance” refers to workers’ claim-making through legal pathways (pp. 29–30). “Boundary-spanning resistance” denotes workers’ demands for improved conditions such as higher wages (above legal minimum levels) (p. 30). “Transgressive resistance”

involves more ambitious worker goals like trade union reforms perceived as anathema by stability-obsessed officials, cross-workplace strikes and coalitions with movement-oriented groups (pp. 6, 30–31). In their choice of tactics, some workers go through government-administered adjudication of employment disputes, while “radicals” call for strikes to bargain with employers and/or officials. In terms of organization, contained activism rarely goes beyond the shop floor and usually stays contained within the workplace, whereas boundary-spanning contention is deemed more sensitive but still modest in the structures workers create. Transgressive activism is characterized by social mobilization across workplaces or even across cities and provinces. In large-scale protests, organizers seek to advance their interests by leveraging media, lawyers and non-governmental organizations (ngos) at home and abroad. The escalation of labor unrest poses real or imagined threats to the state.

Local officials have incentives to preempt and combat rising labor conflicts in their jurisdictions. The cadre promotion system considers “stability maintenance” as a key performance indicator (pp. 48–50). Officials-in-charge are disciplined to guard against workers and other social groups that could cause instability. On close examination, the author finds distinct “regional models of control” with varying intensities and forms of labor resistance.

In Jiangsu’s Yangtze River Delta (that is, southern Jiangsu) in East China, workers’ deployment of relatively moderate forms of resistance has resulted in “orthodox control.” There, trade unions provide legal aid and social assistance to needy workers. They also open a fast-track “green channel” for workers to report emergency information, mediating “labor relations contradictions and mass incidents in a timely manner” (p. 78). “Mass incidents” refer to large protests, strikes and riots. Active government intervention to resolve worker problems, monitor enterprises for signs of impending disturbances, and isolate labor advocacy groups generally preserve industrial peace. There is no urgency for local state leaders to introduce reforms that might destabilize the status quo.

By contrast, in Guangdong’s Pearl River Delta region (including nine major cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan) in South China, officials adopt “risk-taking control” to handle intense labor conflicts. This may involve arrests, detentions and imprisonment of worker ringleaders, including their family members and close allies. Labor protesters risk being charged with “gathering a crowd to disturb social order,” “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” or “inciting subversion of state power” (pp. 102–107). At the same time,

officials have introduced legislative initiatives to promote worker voice, such as sectoral collective bargaining agreements, even though their actual effects are limited. In addition, they make efforts to push out the most abusive and lowest value-added businesses to boost growth.

“The different bundles of policies adopted by different local governments,” the author concludes, “congeal into contrasting models” of labor politics (p. 8). Interestingly, the state’s responsive and repressive capacities have both been strengthened over time. On the one hand, statistical analysis of 2003–2012 shows that greater conflict is correlated with pro-worker arbitration awards or litigation outcomes and “split decisions,” far outstripping pro-business decisions.ⁱⁱ And although split decisions frequently compromise workers’ legal rights and provoke anger, still, “even such decisions are an improvement over rejecting labor’s demands outright” (p. 119). Local governments pay out compensation when employers fail to do so. The result is that workers are emboldened to file cases in the hope of winning concessions. This trend—the higher proportions of pro-worker decisions in cases accepted for mediation, arbitration and court—indicates the increased responsive capacity of the state.

On the other hand, labor unrest is correlated with greater spending on armed police personnel and equipment.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2010, spending on domestic public security (local and central combined) overtook national defense spending, and has remained narrowly ahead ever since. In 2015, for example, spending on internal security forces approached 1 trillion rmb and defense spending surpassed 900 billion rmb.^{iv} This is a measure of the increased repressive capacity of the state.

Bottom-up pressure, in the author’s insightful analysis, has shaped and will continue to shape state policy. In recent years, worker self-organization and cross-border campaigning (between Hong Kong and mainland China) have been dampened and driven underground as workers and activists seek to avert violent crackdowns. Meanwhile, the Xi administration has improved worker access to social assistance and public welfare. Official trade unions have further expanded their membership in formal and informal work settings. Co-optation of service-oriented social organizations is giving rise to the growth of “government-organized ngos” (p. 102).

On the whole, the author contends that “the responsive gestures made by authorities to date have not been enough to counterbalance the repression for workers” (p. 11). In addition, the “increased use of the state’s repressive

capacity can destroy the trust built by increased responsive capacity” (p. 158). Repression and responsiveness, though difficult to coordinate across different levels and between different arms of the government, is integral to authoritarian evolution. This well-researched book describes an unsettling world with workers confronting not only capital but also the Chinese party-state in a highly unequal global economy.

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ⁱ In China there is no official count of the number of labor strikes they have every year. China Strikes (<https://chinastrikes.crowdmap.com/>), a geo-referenced dataset constructed by Manfred Elfstrom, covering light industry, construction, transportation and other sectors, is openly available. The data sources include Chinese state media, foreign reporting, dissident websites, online bulletin boards and social media. Despite state censorship and surveillance, China Strikes reported 1471 cases of Chinese worker strikes, protests and riots between January 2003 and December 2012, signifying a new wave of labor unrest in the wake of bankruptcies, privatization, mergers and acquisition of state-owned enterprises during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Referencing the Strike Map (<https://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>) compiled by Hong Kong-based non-governmental organization China Labour Bulletin (2011 to present), the data reveal rising labor unrest even when many incidents go unreported online.

ⁱⁱ At the national level, since 1996, the government has released annual data on employment disputes brought to mediation, arbitration and court in the Chinese Labour Statistical Yearbook (*Zhongguo Laodong Tongji Nianjian*). The outcomes of formally adjudicated employment disputes are decided in a pro-worker, pro-business or split manner. The quantitative data on dispute outcomes, broken down by the three categories, are clearly shown.

ⁱⁱⁱ Spending on the paramilitary People’s Armed Police (pap) was available on a province-by- province basis for the period from 2003 to 2009 (via the Financial Statistics of Cities and Counties); thereafter, the government only shows the national aggregate. The pap is charged with handling riots, rebellion and other large-scale social safety incidents.

^{iv} China has spent more on internal security forces than on national defense. The author draws from the China Statistical Yearbook (*Zhongguo Tongji Nianjian*) to report annual spending on domestic public security versus national defense.