

Book Review

Sarah Swider (2015)

Building China: Informal Work and the New Precariat.
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China's construction boom is the largest national construction programme in human history. Workers have built the tallest buildings, longest bridges and poured almost unimaginable oceans of concrete. In 2010, Swider tells us, China "used 57 percent of the world's production of cement for less than 20 percent of the world's population" (p. 1). Even more astonishingly, between 2008 and 2010, China used more cement than the USA used during the entire twentieth century! And yet ethnographic research into the employment conditions that this extraordinary boom has generated remains the exception. This short but intense book is an important breakthrough – at least in the English language – and makes an important contribution to our understanding of labour relations and employment in China's construction industry.

Swider's research was conducted in three fieldwork trips over eight years between 2004 and 2012 – boom years for the Chinese economy. Her primary data is drawn from 130 interviews, mainly with migrant construction workers and labour contractors. But she did not stop there. Despite being a "white woman who grew up around farmers in one of the whitest states in the United States" (p. ix), Swider managed to gain employment on two of the construction sites she researched. It's been a long time coming, but Swider's decade-long project has been worth the wait.

Building China is organised into seven chapters. The first contextualises labour in China's construction industry with a discussion of the "new working class" it has helped to create drawing on the work of Pun Ngai, Ching Kwan Lee and Guy Standing, among others. Chapter Two continues setting the scene by explaining the connections between China's construction industry, internal rural-urban migration and *hukou* – China's "internal passport system that links citizenship rights and welfare benefits to birthplace" (p. 21). Swider explains the different types of migrant worker in China before homing in on the category most pertinent to her study – temporary registered migrants and especially temporary unregistered migrants. Approximately one-third of their combined numbers of 131 million in 2000 work in construction (p. 27). Unregistered migrant workers are mostly "missing" from official statistics despite the fact that they "make up roughly 12 percent of the urban population" (p. 27) – testament, if more was needed, to the importance of the author's research in uncovering their working lives. The introductory section is followed by three chapters that present the book's chief contribution to our understanding of labour relations and employment in the industry: the concept of employment configuration. The final two chapters discuss how construction workers are able to resist these "restrictive regimes" (p. 101) under conditions of "precarious authoritarianism" (p. 123).

Swider's development of "employment configuration" is grounded in her frustration – shared by this reviewer – with the "existing definitional and conceptual limitations" (p. 8) contained in the formal/informal employment dichotomy. The latter framing, she argues, "obscures the diversity of arrangements within and across the formal/informal divide" (p. 8). In contrast, Swider defines "employment configuration" as a "specific pathway into employment linked with a specific mechanism that regulates the employment relationship" (p. 8). Swider's argument is that "employment configuration" is able to capture and differentiate informal work as "labour laws create categories of *formal* precarious work" such as temporary, contracted or part-time employment (p. 8). It is a thought-provoking and persuasive approach.

In construction three such configurations are presented: mediated employment, embedded employment and individualised employment. The pathway to mediated employment is via labour contractors who rely on the *hukou* system to survive and reproduce the configuration across China's cities. The labour contractors' trump card is that they are able to fund rural migrants' journey to urban construction sites where they work, live and eat in a social relation that provides them with monthly pocket money for daily reproduction.

Actual wages are paid in a lump sum at the end of the year if all goes according to plan. Using her interview data, Swider narrates how and why they frequently do not. And she uses her analytical acumen to explain how, even when workers are paid on time and stay uninjured, they can become trapped in a cycle of isolation and bachelorhood – a significant majority of the workers in this configuration are male – as they move from one walled-off and securitised urban site to another in a state of "permanent temporariness" (p. 126). The author allows that mediated employment shares similarities with other employment relations such as those found by Burawoy (1985) in South Africa and Pun and Smith (2007) in South China's factory dormitories; this suggests, in an all-too-rare direct reference to gender, that "they are gendered versions of the same employment configuration: (p. 134).

In contrast, "embedded employment" is characterised by dense social networks that cohere around migrant "villages" in large cities such as Baijiacun in the Haidian district in Beijing. Baijiacun is home chiefly to migrants from Henan province who "are not only working in the cities, they are also living in the cities and building new lives in the cities" (p. 80). Social networks at kinship, hometown, provincial and occupational levels provide the main pathway into employment, and employment relations are "regulated by mechanisms evolving from these social networks" (p. 58). Swider argues that whereas the main risk to workers in mediated employment is the behaviour of the labour contractor and agents further up the construction supply chain, embedded employment leaves workers "less vulnerable in relation to their employer but more vulnerable in relation to the state" (p. 59) and its occasional "cleansing campaigns" that serve not only to remind migrants they remain outsiders but also to reconfirm state control and stability.

Labour contractors in this employment configuration are generally small, hiring less than fifty men drawn from both rural and urban labour markets and a mix of social networks. The mechanisms of kinship obligation, bounded solidarity, enforceable trust and reciprocity that discipline the employment relations of embedded employment are harsh. They generate intense job-based labour processes that leaves workers "burnt out" from exhaustion, injury, disease or all three by their mid-thirties. In this young man's game, workers who can develop new skills exit as soon as they can. Those who get stuck "stay until they cannot work anymore and then move on to other types of work or end up destitute, decrepit or dead" (p. 81).

“Individual employment” is the third employment configuration analysed by Swider. She demonstrates how it is regulated chiefly by violence and the hegemony of street labour market bosses whose power even extends to influence over local state agencies such as the police and uniformed urban management officers known as *cheng guan*. Construction workers who find themselves in “individualised employment” are highly vulnerable, highly mobile and highly visible, often sleeping rough in public spaces and dependent on urban labour markets as “markets of the last resort” (p. 85). Indeed, Swider argues that the frequent substitution of food and shelter for wages, the inhumane pace of work, use of violence as the main control mechanism and extreme lack of job security combine to render individualised employment a form of unfree labour.

At least, I think she does. There is no doubt that the conditions of employment described by Swider are cruel and involve more or less coercion. At times the author refers to them as “similar to unfree labour” (p. 84) and at others as “unfree labour and slave-like conditions” (p. 90). The inconsistency is more than a semantic quibble, as the author misses an opportunity to use her data to contribute to the important debates over the relationship between unfree labour, employment relations and capitalism in general. For example, in critiquing the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) report *A Global Alliance Against Forced Labour* (2005), Lerche (2008: 431) argues that the ILO “depoliticizes forced labour issues, isolates them as an ‘unnatural’ element of capitalism, and avoids any politicization that could lead towards a general critique of capitalism”. I was left wondering if Swider regarded the individual employment configuration as an isolated aspect of social relations in China’s construction industry or an integrated part of the whole machine. The point is not academic but rather to understand the social relations underlying forced labour and stop it.

A lack of clarity also undermines Swider’s conceptual approach to the class relations that underpin her development of “employment configurations” as a concept. The title of the book refers to China’s new “precariat” but the book itself does *not* directly conflate the precarious work in either the formal or informal economy with Standing’s (2011) contested notion of a precariat. The author briefly engages with the debate on page twenty, but appears to miss its considerable conceptual implications for both labour studies and labour movements.

These missed opportunities should not deter us from reading this otherwise excellent book. It has the vital quality of meeting rigorous standards of academic research while remaining accessible to the wider reading public. The book is eminently suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students of labour studies, China studies and even anthropology. It will certainly be added to the reading lists on our MSc in Labour, Social Movements and Development here at SOAS.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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