

Book Review

**Lu Zhang (2015) *Inside China's Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance*. New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1107030855. 240 pp.
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With the rapid development of the auto industry in China, auto workers have become an important part of the Chinese working class and are increasingly willing to engage in collective actions for their interests, as is demonstrated by the Honda strike and subsequent strikes in 2010. However, existing ethnographic studies on Chinese workers mainly focus on female migrant workers (*dagongmei*) in labour-intensive and low-cost manufacturing industries, with limited studies on skilled and semi-skilled male workers in capital- and technology-intensive industries like the automobile industry. Fortunately, Lu Zhang's book *Inside China's Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance* has filled this research gap. Based on a total of twenty months of fieldwork in seven large auto assembly factories between 2004 and 2011, Zhang presents an impressive and detailed ethnographic study on the changing work organisation and labour protests on the shop floor of the Chinese automobile industry.

A main finding of Zhang's book is that, in order to resolve the profitability–legitimacy contradiction, the management and the state have employed a “labor force dualism” strategy, referring to “a labor control mechanism that deploys formal and temporary workers side by side on production lines, having them perform similar or identical tasks but subjecting them to differential treatment” (p. 12). As argued by Zhang, since the state-led reform in the mid-1980s, the Chinese automobile industry has been released from the protection of the state and become more integrated into the global production system. Major automakers in China, facing intense competition and profitability pressures, have tended to lower labour protection and develop a leaner and meaner work regime. On the other hand, the auto assembly factories which are still controlled by the state, which has strong revolutionary and state-socialist legacies, are also responsible for maintaining legitimacy with labour and stabilising industrial relations. To deal with this dilemma, the management and the state have divided formal (regular) workers and temporary workers in the assembly plants by offering relatively higher wages and secure employment to the formal workers, and lower wage and job security to the temporary workers. The division of the workforce, Zhang contends, is the key to understand the dynamics of labour politics in the Chinese automobile assembly sector.

Zhang further examines auto workers' grievances, bargaining power and various forms of resistance under the labour force dualism system. As she indicates, the rapid expansion and concentration of automobile production has increased the workplace bargaining power of a new generation of Chinese auto workers. In the meantime, the leaner and meaner labour regime, which is characterised by increased intensity of work, decreased job security, stagnating wages and a more arbitrary management style, has generated growing grievances among workers. The combination of

strong workplace bargaining power and strong grievances has contributed to rising labour unrest in the industry. Additionally, Zhang discusses different strategies employed by the formal and temporary workers. According to her observation, since labour control over formal workers was generally hegemonic and sophisticated, they tended to adopt individual coping strategies to the changing work environment. When the management reduced protections and privileges provided to them, formal workers resorted to both hidden and open forms of resistance, such as effort-bargaining and sit-in strikes, in order to pressure their employers. Compared to formal workers' experiences, temporary workers were more active in taking collective action to protest against the unequal labour system. The new generation of temporary workers, who are increasingly urban and better educated, concentrated in collective dormitories and familiar with online organising strategies, has actively exploited their strong workplace bargaining power by organising wildcat strikes. By elaborating on two cases of temporary workers' strikes, Zhang indicates that their actions are more effective when they receive tacit support from formal workers. Although Chinese auto workers' struggles are still "cellular" and apolitical, they have not only forced their employers to improve working conditions, but also pressured the state to introduce new labour laws and regulations which provide more protection and rights for workers. Therefore, the potential of Chinese auto workers' grassroots activism in challenging the existing labour regime should not be underestimated.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to studies on Chinese workers and labour relations. It provides important insights into the interplay between capital, the state and auto workers in post-socialist China. But Zhang's analysis comes with several limitations. First, although auto workers' collective actions are a central theme of the book, there is a lack of empirical data and in-depth analysis of auto workers' strikes. We gain a limited understanding about how auto workers articulate their demands, develop strategies, mobilise their co-workers and organise sit-in strikes. While Zhang indicates that auto workers have strong workplace bargaining power and their strikes are becoming radicalised, the characteristics and effectiveness of auto workers' strikes are not fully discussed. It would have been interesting to compare auto workers' actions with those of migrant workers in other industries (in particular labour-intensive, low-cost manufacturing industries). Second, although Zhang notes the political implications of auto workers' unrest, she mainly focuses on the impact on the labour law. It is worthy to note that an outstanding characteristic of auto workers' actions is that they are striking offensively, meaning their strike demands (such as wage increases) are generally beyond the legal standard and cannot be channelled into the legal procedures, and have to be settled through collective negotiation. Thus, it is necessary to examine how auto workers' strikes created pressure for and gained reforms of workplace trade unions and collective negotiation systems, which is under-explored in Zhang's study. Third, Zhang's book only illustrates the labour force dualism in auto assembly factories, ignoring the broader labour segregation in auto manufacturing plants. Considering that workers from auto parts factories have become a leading force of labour protests since the strike wave in 2010, more ethnographic studies and theoretical discussion on their grievances and strike experiences might yield more fruitful insights into the labour politics in the Chinese automobile industry.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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