

## Book Review

**Elaine S.I. Hui (2018) *Hegemonic Transformation: The State, Laws, and Labour Relations in Post-Socialist China*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. ISBN 978-1-349-70019-6. xv+266 pp. Hardcover £65**

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*[In July of this year, the Global Labour Journal organised a panel of book review presentations at the International Sociological Association's World Congress of Sociology in Toronto, Canada. This review was first presented there – Editor.]*

In *Hegemonic Transformation*, Hui systematically investigates a crucial question in the studies of China labour politics and the political economy of China's market reform: How has the Chinese party-state been able to maintain hegemonic control over its working populace, despite its abandonment of the socialist social contract and pursuit of capitalist development that builds on the super-exploitation of the Chinese working class?

Engaging with theoretical insights from Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas and critical legal scholarship, and based on extensive fieldwork conducted in the Pearl River Delta, Hui contends that Chinese economic reform since 1978 has been a top-down "passive revolution" led by the Chinese party-state, and that it has undergone a "hegemonic transformation" from coercive tactics to establishing capitalist hegemony in recent years (pp. 106–107). The labour law system is a crucial vehicle through which the party-state seeks to secure the working class's consent to the capitalist class's "ethno-political" leadership. It has produced a double hegemony with regards to the capital–labour relations and state–labour relations, which seeks to deflect workers' opposition against both the market economy and the party-state. The effects, however, have influenced Chinese migrant workers unevenly. While Hui cautions that the state-constructed legal hegemony is fragile and precarious, the consequence of China's hegemonic transformation has so far been effective in pre-empting any workers' movements that can directly challenge the capitalist economy and the party-state rule in China.

Building on the pioneering work of Lee, Pan and Chan on the interplay of the Chinese state, migrant workers and labour laws, *Hegemonic Transformation* stands out by its systematic engagement with Gramscian theory to explore the under-theorised ideological characteristics of the Chinese state, while giving voice to workers' thinking and views on the labour law system. Based on participant observations and in-depth interviews with migrant workers in five cities in the Pearl River Delta between 2012 and 2014, Hui carefully constructs a typology to conceptualise the differing degrees of hegemonic effects mediated through the labour law system in the three empirical chapters (4, 5, 6) (pp. 106–107). The affirmative workers have consented to the justness of the legal system. They trust that the party–state is autonomous from the capitalists and is able to constrain them through the rule of law. The indifferent, ambiguous and critical workers have

only given passive consent – that is, they are not true believers of the labour law system, but they nevertheless accept the reality and believe that the existing labour laws are better than nothing. The radical workers have refused to give any consent at all. They see the labour law system as fundamentally biased and the party–state as heavily skewed in favour of the capitalist class. The typology is further elaborated by concrete examples of each type of worker, based on their experiences with labour laws – those who have no labour dispute experiences, those who have individual labour dispute experiences, and those who have collective labour dispute experiences. At the same time, Hui’s analysis of workers’ experience with labour laws is intertwined with their own lives, work and other subjective experiences. The rich details and careful and nuanced analysis produce a multifaceted portrait of the various ways Chinese migrant workers engage/disengage, negotiate or challenge the state-constructed legal hegemony. The result is a compelling and nuanced argument that elucidates the wide variety of possibilities and sheds new light on the current debate over the state and future of labour movements in China.

It is unclear to me, however, how the hegemonic mechanism of the labour law system interacts with the subjective experiences of workers in shaping workers’ vulnerability towards legal hegemony. One might think that workers with labour dispute experiences or who are participating in collective actions are more likely to become radicalised. Yet we have cases of affirmative workers who have participated in strikes. On the other hand, we have workers without labour dispute experience who become radicalised and refuse to give any consent to legal hegemony. While the book tends to suggest that workers’ experience with labour disputes is important to explain the variations in workers’ responses, it is not clear *how* it matters. To be fair, Hui mentions other factors such as age, education, work experience and interactions with NGOs in her explanation of the variations. But readers would benefit from a more systematic analysis and better-articulated mechanisms to explain the wide variation in workers’ responses.

To probe it a little bit further, in some cases I wonder whether it is workers’ consent to legal hegemony or simply the question of being strategic and practical when workers and activists are faced with the real threat of outright state repression and coercion. For instance, in the case of You Yang, one of the critical workers, he was cautious of not crossing the legal boundaries when taking action, because he was well aware that workers can be jailed by police if their actions violate laws (pp. 170–175). In another case, Chang Shan, characterised as an ambivalent worker in Chapter 5, was an active leader during the 2010 Honda strike. He had mixed views on the labour law system, and thought the strike should be carefully staged within legal boundaries so that the police would have no excuse to arrest strikers (p. 185). Rather than viewing this as evidence of workers’ passive consent, might not this be interpreted as workers’ strategic and practical decision-making when they are clearly faced with state coercion and police clampdowns during their strikes? In other words, when there are clear obstacles to open, collective resistance, how can one differentiate between workers’ calculated conformity, cautious resistance and passive consent? Perhaps we need another category? As James Scott’s (1990) notion of “public transcript” vs. “hidden transcript” has illustrated, what the subordinate groups say publicly is quite different from what they actually think and act offstage. Is there a way to distinguish between what workers say in public to outside researchers and what they actually think and act? I suspect there is a dissident subculture offstage that might not be easily theorised by consent and hegemony.

In sum, *Hegemonic Transformation* makes an important contribution to the literature and will be essential reading for anyone who wants to better understand Chinese labour politics, the political economy of Chinese market reform, and how China has remained politically stable under the

leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in spite of the dramatic capitalist development and the profound social-economic changes over the past four decades.

## REFERENCE

Scott, James (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

LU ZHANG is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Temple University. Her research concentrates on labour and labour movements, globalisation, development and the political economy of China. She is the author of *Inside China's Automobile Factories: The Politics of Labor and Worker Resistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). She is currently working on her second book, which explores how the movements of capital interact with labour politics and local development through a comparative case study of the global electronics industry from China's coastal region to its interior and to Vietnam. [Email: [lu.zhang1@temple.edu](mailto:lu.zhang1@temple.edu)]