

Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation. & China and Globalization: The Social, Economic and Political Transformation of Chinese Society, 2d ed. (Book review)

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Abstract:

A review of two books: *Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation* edited by Ching Kwan and *China and Globalization: The Social, Economic and Political Transformation of Chinese Society* by Doug Guthrie.

Keywords: Book Review | China | Socioeconomics | Politics | Ethnography

Article:

For those interested in examining socioeconomic and cultural transformations taking place in contemporary China, *Working in China* is a must read. An edited volume of collective ethnographic experiences documenting changes in labor practices and the workplace, it is the product of a workshop held in 2004 on "Working in China," in which the chapter contributors participated. The 12 chapters are divided into three parts, each of which is highly informative, relevant, and timely. Section one focuses on the "remaking of class and community," section two on "gendering service work," and section three on "new professions and knowledge workers" in a changing China.

In the past 25 years, China has undergone significant economic change and market reforms, aggressively expanding its role in the global economy. How China effected these rapid transformations and some of the ramifications in various economic sectors are well illustrated in this edited volume. Most impressive about each of the articles is their grounding in the authors' ethnographic experiences in China for an extended period of time to collect data documenting change in various workplace settings. By adopting an ethnographic approach, the authors are able to examine the workplace in China as an organizational arena. For these various authors the emphasis is on workplace as the site where employment relations, labor processes, occupational culture, and identities are formed. The authors have opted not to emphasize or focus on political or state-sponsored clientelism and ideological political control of the people. This shift in orientation has enabled the researchers to examine a wide range of occupations, work settings, labor relations, power structures, gender, ethnicity, class, alienation, and a host of other related topics that bring to light a broad spectrum of changes taking place in both urban and rural China.

These methodological opportunities and subsequent changes in theoretical orientation permit the authors to revisit the conceptual framework of political economy of work and of the workplace in China with a new and fresh perspective. The case studies presented reflect changes over the past 25 years, whether due to new factories and factory structures, new professions (i.e., insurance salesmen, engineers, lawyers, service workers), management, and employee structure and relations. The ethnographic approach enabled the researchers to give voice to those they interviewed, providing an even deeper inside understanding to the transformations taking place.

During this period of globalization, market and economic changes impacted Chinese laborers (both men and women). They are, for example, no longer guaranteed welfare benefits, life-long employment, or pension security. The researchers take the view that not all of these changes have been positive, and suggest that some of the organizational and structural change had negative social, environmental, political, and economic consequences. For example, the elders who remember the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution lament the lack of social equality, along with increased competition and pressure to have more in terms of material items, status, and power. These different working environments indicate an increase in competition at the workplace among employees. To this end, the researchers suggest that although there are tremendous changes in labor relations, the workplace, accumulation of material items, and connection to the global market place, some changes are not welcomed by certain segments of the population, and some of the changes might have negative consequences in the future. Time will tell where these changes will take China in the 21st century.

In the second book, *China and Globalization*, author Doug Guthrie reports on social, economic, and political transformations in Chinese society that he has followed since researching China in the early 1990s. The past quarter century has witnessed gradual reforms. For example, the state created an institutional environment that integrated China into the global market, both externally and internally. Guthrie discusses how foreign capital facilitated internal and export-led development, enabling China to become one of the largest suppliers of manufactured goods in the world. However, as the author and several contributors to *Working in China* point out, this has been at a cost to the environment and the social fabric of Chinese society.

The historical account reported in *China and Globalization* describes how firms learned to survive and thrive in the new market conditions. Guthrie notes that not all firms (businesses) have been successful and attributes two central reasons for these outcomes. First, the labor squeeze and productivity combined is measured as output-per-unit labor. The more successful companies have done better as a result of foreign investment of a particular kind—a joint venture relationship— which has helped guide firms through the process of economic development and learning the dynamics of the market economy. Recounting personal stories obtained from one-on-one interviews, Guthrie illustrates the impact that foreign capital investments and globalization have had on the everyday lives of workers in a variety of work settings.

Second, Guthrie points out how decentralization has been a critical factor in the government's management of the transition to a market economy. He documents how shifting from state control of industry to more local control has had a significant impact on this transformation process. Traditionally, the basic levels of Chinese government are the central, provincial, municipal, township, and village governments. The success of a firm during this period of

economic control is related to its degree of independence from state control. While the Chinese government did not undertake a process of full-scale privatization of the state-owned economy, Guthrie points out how it did allow a private economy to emerge. With an increasingly competitive marketplace, the state sector is now one of the competitors vying online with foreign and domestic groups.

Guthrie describes various labor reforms and transformations taking place at the workplace. He points out how Chinese companies are adopting a number of Western business models with formal organizational rules, formal grievance filing procedures, and formal pay scales. There have been new labor laws enacted for state-owned organizations as well as for privatized companies. Moreover, there are concerns over abuses of human rights and labor that are inextricably tied to China's reputation in the global economy, and to China's desire to make up for lost time and become a major player. Similar examples of labor struggles in workplace settings are found in *Working in China*, which makes these two books work well together as complementary sources.

After reading both of these books in sequence, I am left with a number of questions that cannot be answered just yet. For example, how will China be transformed over the next 25 years? Will the current trends in use of the natural environment, drawing from its natural resource base, be sustainable with further development? Will her people at all levels be able to sustain the level of output that has brought China to global prominence? As different ethnic Chinese groups vie for "success"—increased material wealth, increased access to "power"—what might be the implications for Chinese culture, social transformations, the political and economic system, and availability of natural resources for every need (clean water and air) and for commodity production (arable lands for food production, minerals, and other naturally occurring resources)? Guthrie questions when the institutional mechanism that structures the economy and social order in a planned economy could break down, and what would be the effects on the life chances of individuals within that system. As researchers continue to examine a changing Chinese workplace, economy, and market reform, one would eventually hope that identifying mechanisms for sustainable development that are socially and environmentally just would be incorporated into the research and development process. Even if it is not the responsibility of future researchers to push the envelope, we at least owe it to those in the labor force who are working under a transforming system to undertake such a critical enquiry.