

DISENFRANCHISED:
The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China

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SYNOPSIS

Disenfranchised recounts the tumultuous events that have shaped and reshaped factory politics in China over the past seven decades. From the 1950s through the 1980s, Chinese factories featured permanent job tenure; then in the 1990s, China suddenly became a pioneer in developing flexible employment systems that provide little job security. While the traumatic economic impact of this shift has been the focus of much research, my main concern has been changes in the political status of workers inside China's factories.

What has happened in China, I point out, is an extreme manifestation of trends that have restructured employment relations around the globe. During the decades that followed the Second World War, factories in many countries—both socialist and capitalist—provided stable, long term employment and a range of economic entitlements as well as political rights and duties. The idea of “industrial democracy” was in vogue and many countries created institutions to facilitate workers’ participation in factory management, some more democratic than others. The 1970s were the highpoint of this era of industrial citizenship. Since then, employment has become increasingly precarious and ideas and institutions of industrial citizenship and industrial democracy have been gradually discarded as infringements on private property rights, open labor markets, and profit imperatives. Nowhere have these changes been more dramatic than in China.

In the book, I develop a theoretical framework consisting of two dimensions—industrial citizenship and autonomy—to analyze changing authority relations in workplaces in China and around the globe. Citizenship status in a factory means that workers have job security and are recognized as legitimate stakeholders. The degree to which individuals have citizenship rights in their workplaces varies greatly and this, I propose, has a critical impact on the possibilities for democratic participation. To really be able to participate in democratic decision making, however, requires not only citizenship, but also autonomy. For my purposes, autonomy refers to the extent to which individuals are able to manage their own work as well as the extent to which they can express opinions and organize collectively to pursue common agendas.

Among the many 20th century experiments in workers’ participation, China is a particularly interesting case. This is not because Chinese factories were at any point an exceptionally admirable model of industrial democracy; they were not. The Chinese case, however, is especially enlightening for two reasons, which have to do with two basic conditions I highlight as necessary for industrial democracy.

With regard to the first condition, industrial citizenship, under the Chinese work unit system—in place through the early 1990s—employment was perhaps more permanent than in any other country, allowing for the development of a strong sense of workplace citizenship and facilitating robust if limited participatory management practices. Moreover, the work unit system incorporated virtually the entire urban population. All this changed quickly in the 1990s with the dismantling of the system. This book demonstrates how the sudden replacement of permanent job tenure with highly flexible employment led to much more coercive labor management practices. The extreme nature of the simultaneous changes in both employment security and management practices reveals in stark form the connection between the two.

With regard to the second condition, the problem of lack of autonomy was particularly acute in China, but so were efforts to confront the problem. Lack of autonomy was, of course, a problem in many systems of workplace participation, especially in countries that adopted the Soviet model. Among these countries, China's experience is particularly illuminating because of the Cultural Revolution. The book examines in detail what happened in factories when Mao—concerned that party cadres were becoming a privileged “bureaucratic class”—suddenly called on workers to organize their own “rebel fighting groups” and attack the party leadership in their workplaces. The violent battles of the Cultural Revolution reflected an especially audacious and fascinating effort to deal with the problems created by lack of autonomy, even if it was ultimately unsuccessful.

Disenfranchised challenges the most influential interpretation of industrial relations in China and other socialist societies, Andrew Walder's *Communist Neo-Traditionalism*. In his classic sociological account, Walder argued that because Chinese workers had little opportunity to change jobs and relied on their work unit for most of their material needs they were dependent not only on their factories, but also on their immediate supervisors. Permanent job tenure, he contended, had to be eliminated to free workers from dependency. While acknowledging that permanent employment did foster dependency, my book reconsiders Walder's overall interpretation, showing that membership also gave workers significant rights and powers in their workplaces, which they lost when lifetime job tenure was eliminated. Opening up labor markets, I argue, has disenfranchised workers and led to far more repressive labor relations.

The book has been the culmination of over a decade of field research, which involved interviewing over 120 workers, managers, party cadres, and other employees who have worked in scores of factories, mines and other industrial enterprises at some point during the last seventy years. Many met with me on multiple occasions over many years, allowing us to delve deeper into issues I came to better understand as time went on. I also collected voluminous written materials published by government, party, union, and enterprise sources, as well as newspapers and pamphlets issued by contending factions during the Cultural Revolution.

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