Rehabilitating the Danwei

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Work units (danwei) and the ‘cradle-to-grave’ employment model that they represented have not escaped the general rejection of China’s Maoist past. Since the onset of the reform era, and especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, they have become symbols of inefficiency and have been repeatedly blamed for many of the imbalances and illnesses in the Chinese economy. Often, such criticisms have involved a political dimension as well: it was said that by offering workers stable employment from the cradle to the grave, along with access to public services and other essential goods, the work units actually put workers in a position of dependency. Yes, workers did not have to worry about the possibility being laid off, about how to pay for the education of their children, or how to cover their medical expenses should any health problem arise, but this came at the price of their autonomy. At the same time, not being able to get rid of unruly and lazy employees, managers were also struggling, unable to run their companies in a rational and efficient way. In other words, under the work unit system everybody was worse off and the so-called ‘iron rice bowl’ of lifetime employment was no better than a steel cage.

To ‘free’ both employers and employees from this mutual dependency, it was advised that China establish a proper labour market, that labour relations become governed by written contracts and not a vague social pact, and that welfare provision be delinked from the enterprise. The rest is history. What originally was a minority discourse rapidly became the dominant one and in the 1990s the Chinese authorities oversaw a massive overhaul of the country’s industrial system that led to tens of millions of layoffs. The ties that bound the workers to the socialist work unit were cut, but the price was steep: millions of workers might have been freed from their dependency, but they immediately found themselves subject to the vagaries of the new market with little or no safety net. To make things worse, the authorities began actively blaming them for their lack of entrepreneurship and for expecting the state to fulfill its side of the social pact in line with decades of propaganda. All the while, millions of migrant workers from the countryside began moving to the cities, supplying new enterprises in both the private and public sector with a new source of cheap labour.

Against this bleak background, Joel Andreas’s Disenfranchised represents an attempt to re-evaluate the danwei model from a political point of view. As the author explains in the introduction (p. 10), his account focuses on three poignant questions: to what extent have workers enjoyed rights to citizenship and autonomy in their workplaces? How have these rights changed over this time period, and what has caused these changes? And finally, as these rights have changed, how much power have workers actually had to shape the conditions of their work, participate in decision-making, and hold workplace leaders accountable? In so doing, he challenges two fundamental misconceptions. First, he disproves the idea that the reforms carried out by Deng Xiaoping and his successors transformed China’s economic structures but left the political structures intact, an interpretation that he holds as being largely true outside of the workplace, but not inside it (p. 192). Second, he criticises the idea that the historical process that led to the rise and fall of industrial citizenship in China is somehow exceptional. He convincingly shows that while under the Chinese work unit system employment was perhaps more permanent than in any other country, what happened in China actually reflects global trends in workplace democracy, from its heyday in the wake of the Second World War to its decline through the neoliberal assault of the 1980s and 1990s.

Disenfranchised is not the first attempt to challenge the narratives of dependency fostered by the proponents of the labour reform in China in the 1980s and 1990s, Andrew Walder in primis. The author cites pioneering works by Ching Kwan Lee, Anita Chan and Jonathan Unger, Lu Feng, Huaiyin Li, and Brantley Womack as other instances of critical engagement, but given its historical scope and virulent polemic with Walder’s dependency thesis, this book should rather be read alongside the late Jackie Sheehan’s Chinese Workers: A New History (1998). However, while Sheehan largely relied on official media sources to show that, in spite of all claims of worker dependency, labour activism in the work units of the Maoist era was very much alive, Andreas resorts to a broader variety of sources, in particular interviews with dozens of people who lived through the era. He also offers a much more nuanced theoretical framework inspired by Burawoy’s influential typology of ‘labour regimes’ as outlined in his classic The Politics of Production (1985).

Reading an outline of the history of labour relations in the Chinese workplace during the Maoist era and beyond that is not underpinned by liberal or neoliberal biases is refreshing. In an age of global precarity, it is more necessary than ever to look back at those employment models that were possibly too eagerly dismissed in the frenzy of the 1980s. In fact, looking back is a fundamental precondition if we want to ever be able to find a way forward from the current impasse. In the author’s own words: ‘It is, of course, unlikely that institutions that flourished during the retreat of capital in the postwar decades will re-emerge in exactly the same forms… Nevertheless, as workers continue to strike to gain control over their conditions of work, they will confront similar fundamental issues. To fully understand these issues it is necessary to carefully study the experiences of industrial citizenship as it was envisioned and practiced in the middle decades of the twentieth century’ (p. 235).
Disenfranchised also puts the plight of labour activists in Xi Jinping’s China in context. According to the author, Chinese workers today are starting to be assertive once again, but until they are granted workplace citizenship rights, any gain they might have remains limited and precarious (p. 23). This statement perfectly encapsulates the limitations of labour activism in China today. With the official trade union jealous of its monopoly over labour organisation and continuing to function as a ‘transmission belt’ between the Party-state and the workers, activists in grassroots labour organisations are largely constrained in how they frame their demands. Unable to pursue broader changes related to workplace politics lest they fall victim to state repression, they generally limit themselves to providing legal aid to the workers, framing their activities strictly in the language of legality sanctioned by the Party-state. Only in the mid-2010s, some organisations began pursuing a more aggressive strategy based on collective bargaining and worker organisation, but this attempt at escalating labour struggle on a political level was soon met with unprecedented repression by the Chinese authorities, and today that type of militant labour NGOs has been almost annihilated. In any case, it is sad to say, but without broader reforms aimed at reinforcing workplace citizenship and other structural changes, even collective bargaining would have been of limited use to address the precarity of the contemporary workplace, in China and beyond.

Andreas’s book also highlights interesting historical parallels between the struggles of Chinese workers today and in the past. For instance, the account of the role of temporary workers in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution (see p. 116) resonates with the protests of agency and temporary workers in recent years as documented by several scholars. Broadly speaking, the author’s analysis of workplace relations over several decades not only dispels the idea that Chinese workers were silent and cowed due to their dependency on the danwei, but also somehow scales back that simplistic narrative that took hold over the past decade according to which Chinese workers are ‘waking up’ thanks to the emergence of a new generation of migrant workers allegedly more ‘aware’ of their exploitative working conditions than their predecessor. That might be hold some truth if the comparison is with younger and older migrant workers—but even this is far from established—but Disenfranchised effectively shows that the Chinese working class was awake a long time ago, and its alleged ‘slumber’ is only a recent, possibly induced, state. According to Andreas, the comparison between older and younger workers is a constant refrain in workers’ discussion of how reforms have affected authority relations for the Chinese worker. In the words of one of his interviewees: ‘Older workers, if they think something violates safety rules, if it’s unreasonable, or they just can’t do it, they won’t hesitate to say “No, I won’t do it,”… But young people aren’t willing to say anything. “If you tell me to do it, I’ll go do it.” If they’re unhappy, maybe they won’t do it well, or they might even ruin it, but they will never say “No” to a leader.’ (p. 216).

For a book that offers such a painstakingly comprehensive view of Chinese labour politics since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, there is one puzzling omission: nowhere does the author mentions the turmoil of 1989, nor the role the workers played in it. Although this was not a top-down political campaign, it might have been worth discussing the demands of the workers on that occasion as a window on to how the workers reacted to the early reforms and the limitations of workplace democracy, especially considering that the author devotes quite some space to workers’ demands in other turbulent periods in the 1950s and 1960s. Also, when outlining the adoption of the labour laws of the 1990s and 2000s (from p. 193 on), the author might have included a broader discussion of how the discourse of the law was instrumental in stripping swathes of Chinese workers of their workplace citizenship rights and taming workplace activism. These two small criticisms notwithstanding, Disenfranchised remains a fundamental reading. In this age of global precarity, it will hopefully allow readers to gain a more nuanced view of the Maoist workplace, rediscovering the positive sides of the socialist work unit while not forgetting its many limitations.