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Cultural Values in the Making: Governing through Intangible Heritage

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SIU, Kaxton. 2020. Chinese Migrant Workers and Employer Domination: Comparisons with Hong Kong and Vietnam. London: Palgrave Macmillan

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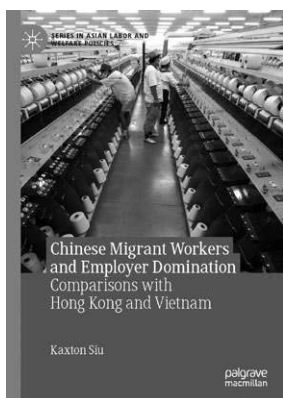
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# Book Reviews



SIU, Kaxton. 2020.  
*Chinese Migrant Workers  
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 Comparisons with Hong Kong  
 and Vietnam.*  
 London: Palgrave Macmillan.

## ÉRIC FLORENCE

In this volume, Kaxton Siu sets out to investigate whether “China’s export-led industrialisation” (p. 14) provides a unique pattern of economic development. Bringing together more than ten years of research, Siu draws from a wealth of sources: from his own quantitative surveys and ethnographic observation to oral history (by female garment workers in Hong Kong between 1960 and the 1980s). He also thoroughly engages with the insights of the history and sociology of labour, of labour studies in post-socialist China, as well as with some of the literature on domination and resistance, adopting a Weberian “strategic-relational” approach to study changing forms of domination on workers.

Throughout the book, he provides a nicely fleshed-out argument for a global shift of paradigm characterising the forms of domination and accumulation regimes at work in South China from the first two decades of economic reforms to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The first phase (1980s and 1990s)<sup>1</sup> corresponds to what he terms “state-endorsed exploitation by non-enforcement of laws” (p. 15), while the second phase, starting in the early 2000s, saw the emergence of “conciliatory despotism” (p. 16). The theoretical distinction between “coercive” and “non-coercive” forms of domination constitutes a “spectrum of modes of domination” (p. 14) that can change according to time and space, and which is also very much dependent on how specific politico-institutional and economic configurations articulate with the global politics of capitalist production. It should be noted that these two phases and related paradigms ought not to be thought of as mutually exclusive, but rather as being reconfigured under changing local and global conditions.

Siu delves into the changing dynamics of subjugation of rural workers in South China by economic, state, and patriarchal power in the garment industry, adopting a comparative perspective with the fate of garment workers in Hong Kong and Vietnam. The combination of historical and geographic comparative perspectives developed by the author sheds fresh light on how various modes of domination over workers have developed over time and space (p. 13). As the author explains, the structure of the book

“follows the expansion of global capitalism in East and Southeast Asia over the last five decades as the sites of export garment production developed in Hong Kong, shifted to China, and then expanded to Vietnam” (p. 8). In Chapter One (p. 1-22), drawing from oral history and his own personal memories, he depicts, for instance, how female workers in the Hong Kong garment industry went from being employed by a booming export-led garment manufacturing sector from the 1960s to the 1980s, to undergoing a process of “deskilling” and “casualisation” from the mid-1980s on, as more and more factories moved to China’s Pearl River Delta to take advantage of huge pools of rural labour and the extremely pro-growth conditions offered to investors. Hong Kong female workers then performed only occasional high-quality orders for labour contractors, and were later completely forced out of the profession and had to engage in low-paid service labour.

One of the many merits of this volume is the way it always seeks to examine how the local organisation of production and labour markets articulate in various ways with the demands of global production chains, and this is where the comparative lens pursued can be insightful. For instance, Siu shows in Chapter Four (p. 85-114) how during rush seasons (typically in November and December) major companies subcontract part of the production to low-end small factories employing older workers under very poor conditions so as to meet the conditions of “just-in-time” orders exerted by retailers and brand-name companies.<sup>2</sup> In Vietnam (Chapter Six, p. 155-96), however, such subcontracting is too difficult to implement and does not prevail, and large companies intensify production by forcing workers to perform overtime work and thereby meet the orders during rush seasons (p. 188). In Vietnam, Siu shows, the labour law itself, being less than elaborate by international standards, enables high levels of exploitation and intensification of production. In China, however, as much scholarship has shown, while the law itself is quite developed, it is the sheer lack of will from the state to implement it that enables pro-capital production regimes.

Siu’s argument on the marginalisation of the “dormitory labour regime” (Smith and Pun 2006) and the greater agency acquired by the second generation of migrant workers brings in the interesting issues of the work-leisure and work-family balance, and of the capacity of workers to gain a hold on some of the space and time in the workplace as well as in their everyday lives. One of the main arguments developed by Siu is that the space and time that migrant workers have gained outside the workplace (in particular at the level of housing and of the family), contrary to Marx’s argument that workers’ lives at the site of production shape their lives outside factories, have contributed to somewhat reducing the length of the working day and altering the labour regimes and domination processes in the workplace (p. 7). Siu is quite optimistic as he notes in his introduction, “In the short run, the structure of domination is reproduced, but in the long run the status quo in the power relations is reshaped” (p. 2). In this way, perhaps, he sheds light on a core element of the resilience of the Party-state, which is to be somewhat responsive to societal demands while at the same time not altering the pro-growth policy choices and politico-institutional arrangements that have so efficiently generated economic growth.

On the whole, this very well-written volume will be of great interest for

both scholars and students in labour and China studies, and represents an insightful addition to earlier scholarship on the politics of labour in South China by scholars such as Anita Chan, Lee Ching-Kwan, Pun Ngai, Tan Shen, Jenny Chan, Chris King-chi Chan, and Jack Linchuan Qiu, to name just a few.

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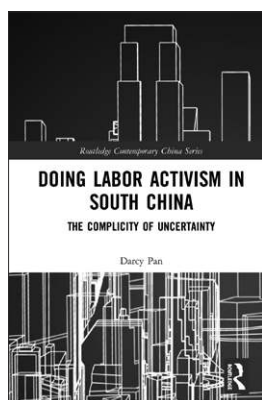
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FAN, Lulu. 2021. "The Forming of E-platform-driven Flexible Specialisation: How E-commerce Platforms Have Changed China's Garment Industry Supply Chains and Labour Relations." *China Perspectives* 124: 29-37.

SMITH, Chris, and Ngai PUN. 2006. "The Dormitory Labour Regime in China as a Site for Control and Resistance." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 17(8): 1456-70.

1. In her seminal work on rural workers in post-socialist China, Anita Chan (2001) characterised this phase as that of "workers under assault."
2. Subcontracting has become even more widespread with the advent of the platformisation of the Chinese economy, as it has further increased the reliance of production on the demands of consumers. This is shown neatly by Fan Lulu (2021).



**PAN, Darcy. 2020.**  
*Doing Labor Activism in South China: The Complicity of Uncertainty.*  
London: Routledge.

## SILVIA FROSINA

Since Hegel's theorisation of China as a state without society, the debate surrounding China's state-society relationship has been centred on crafting a definition of civil society that could apply to non-Western contexts. However, since the 1990s, the global rise of non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organisations has led to the political demand for a normatively charged definition of civil society to reflect the role of such organisations as agents of democratic change. In her book *Doing Labor Activism in South China: The Complicity of Uncertainty*, Darcy Pan offers a picture of the limits of civil society activity in a context where the space for legitimate public action is supervised and permeated by Party ideology.

Focusing on a sample of five foreign-funded labour NGOs operating in South China and Hong Kong, this work aims at understanding how activists establish trust relationships and negotiate power among them while contending with state control. The analysis develops from the assumption that the context within which NGOs operate is kept deliberately ambiguous by the Chinese state in order to promote self-censorship. The resulting state of uncertainty is treated by Pan as an ethnographic space within which labour NGOs negotiate their work, legitimacy, and existence. Uncertainty is thus generative of complicity: "the discourses, informal communication practices, tactics and strategies that help the NGOs dealing with the state" (p. 11).

The book is composed of six chapters. Chapters One and Two respectively introduce the theoretical and historical background of the study. Chapter One clearly states the methodology employed, clarifies the positionality of the researcher, and introduces uncertainty as a space of ethnographic enquiry. Chapter Two traces the historical emergence of labour NGOs in China by linking them to the country's developmental path, its rapid urbanisation, and the phenomenon of migrant workers.

In Chapters Three and Four, the link between uncertainty and complicity is made explicit. By looking at two ethnographic examples – the activists' theorisation of a large-scale crackdown of labour NGOs in Shenzhen and the reactions to the relaxation of policies concerning social organisations in 2012 – Pan investigates the creation of the intimate knowledge required to navigate through the uncertainty about the limits of state-sanctioned activism. The production of complicity through uncertainty is crystallised in the politics of *mingan* (敏感), introduced in Chapter Four. Commonly translated in English as "sensitivity," *mingan* is a multi-layered, inherently political concept that permeates the author's fieldwork among labour NGOs. *Mingan* materialises into both temporal and spatial modes of social organisation that dictate and censor the work of the labour NGOs. One powerful example is the "calendar of activism," the collective understanding of the best and the worst times of the year to criticise the state.

Chapters Five and Six dive into the practice of secrecy and link it to the way success and failure are perceived and articulated by labour activists. Both sections present arguments that are as fascinating as they are counterintuitive, particularly from a Western perspective. Chapter Five looks at how the practice of secrecy is employed to manage the relationship between the labour NGOs and foreign donors against the backdrop of state surveillance. Pan finds that the practice of secrecy in the Chinese labour community may not be as much about evading state surveillance as it is about establishing trust among grassroots actors. Lastly, Chapter Six delves into the activists' perceptions of success and failure to reveal how success is measured, not only as the capacity to promote meaningful change but as the ability to do so while avoiding direct challenges to the state.

Pan's work bridges the gap between the Western conceptualisation of civil society and the Chinese context. In doing so, it subsumes civil society as an intermediate associative sphere situated within the state, rather than a social force opposed to it. The Chinese state and civil society engage in functional reciprocity. On the one hand, NGOs contribute to the reproduction of the