One of the most dramatic changes in the lives of average, urban Chinese since the introduction of market reforms in the 1980s has been the erosion of the “iron rice bowl,” the social contract between the communist government and the Chinese people. The promises of socialism – job security, medical benefits, housing, education, and other elements of social welfare – have gradually given way to the promises of the market. In this book Wenfang Tang, a political scientist, and William Parish, a sociologist, team up to explore the social aspects of China’s economic transformation, the shrinking role of the Chinese government in social welfare, and the politics and difficulties of that transition.

Tang and Parish examine the trade-off – the loss of communal egalitarianism – for the market reforms that give freer reign to individual aspirations in China. Their study, based on a unique set of national social surveys completed over ten years, beginning in 1987, presents a rare glimpse into how the Chinese population is experiencing the shift from a planned to a market economy. The authors give voice to workers, civil servants, intellectuals, and women, who report their grievances and joys at home, work, and in the public sphere. This book offers fresh data on emerging patterns of economic inequality, labor–management relations, political participation, and gender inequality in China. Using comparative data from similar surveys in the more market-based Taiwan, the authors illuminate the future directions in which Chinese society may be headed.

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