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978-0-521-89887-4 - The Chinese Worker after Socialism

William Hurst

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The Chinese Worker after Socialism

While millions in China have been advantaged by three decades of reform, impressive gains have also produced social dislocation. Groups that had been winners under socialism find themselves losers in the new order. Based on field research in nine cities across China, this fascinating study considers the fate of one such group – 35 million workers laid off from the state-owned sector. This book explains why these lay-offs occurred, how workers are coping with unemployment, what actions the state is taking to provide them with livelihoods and re-employment, and what happens when workers mobilize collectively to pursue redress of their substantial grievances. What happens to these people, the remnants of the socialist working class, will be critical in shaping post-socialist politics and society in China and beyond.

WILLIAM HURST is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin.

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Preface

As a teenager in the late 1980s to early 1990s, I was a mediocre athlete at a school not known for its sporting prowess. We played our games on New York City Parks Department fields. But this provided a window onto American de-industrialization. Walking to and from games along streets I might not otherwise have ventured down, or looking up from the sidelines or the dugout, I saw the storied but long-neglected Brooklyn Navy Yard, the equally famous but also rusted and crumbling Red Hook factories and piers, and neighborhoods that seemed to have had virtually all economic and social life sucked out from them. Also very much in the spotlight in those years were the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the triumph of Polish Solidarity, and the purported “collapse of communism.” It was this context that sparked my interest in workers’ politics in the last days of socialism, an interest further strengthened by even starker examples of de-industrialization I observed in Chicago as an undergraduate.

This book began life as my dissertation project in the Political Science Department at the University of California-Berkeley. When I was a brand new graduate student in 1998, Hong Yung Lee hired me in the fall semester as a research assistant. His assignment to me was to track down and evaluate what social scientists had written about Chinese lay-offs (*xiagang*) and state-owned enterprise reform. I was astonished to learn that so little had been written about a topic that seemed so significant.

The following semester, spring 1999, I took Ruth Collier’s seminar on labor politics. There I learned about the diversity of that vibrant field. But I also perceived that a large portion – probably the majority – of scholarship on labor politics centered on the electoral strategies of labor-based parties or the political advocacy of trade unions. Since neither unions nor parties play much of a role in China, I began to wonder if this might be why relatively little attention had been paid to Chinese lay-offs. It was then that I decided to write a dissertation on the politics of unemployment in the Chinese state sector.

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Kevin O'Brien has been the single most important adviser and mentor I had at Berkeley or anywhere before or since. It was in his classes that I gained a clear sense of where the gaps and well-trodden areas of the Chinese politics field were. After his return from Ohio and my return from fieldwork in China, he also played the leading role in helping to shape my dissertation into something more cogent and my thinking into that of a more mature social scientist. Also extremely helpful in my writing and later revision of the dissertation was Thomas Gold, a sociologist who has worked with an astonishing number of Berkeley China specialist students over the past twenty-five years. In the important interval between first-year courses and the start of my field research, David Collier and Lowell Dittmer helped me both to design a study that could bear fruit for political science and to understand how to go about conducting research in China. They each also came through with contacts and references for funding and affiliations that were essential for getting my fieldwork under way. Lastly, at key times during my writing, Kiren Aziz Chaudhry and Ruth Collier each offered important insights on how to sharpen my arguments and make my Chinese data more legible to comparative politics.

My studies at Berkeley, however, rested on the foundation of my undergraduate and masters-level training at the University of Chicago. In particular, William Parish, Lloyd Rudolph, and Dali Yang helped me acquire the solid grounding I needed to pursue my later research. Also essential to any successful research on China are contacts and affiliations with Chinese universities. I was based for my research at Beijing University, where the Research Center on Contemporary China and the School of Government provided needed affiliations, while Shen Mingming and Xu Xianglin provided essential support, guidance, and assistance in my work. Many friends, scholars, workers, officials, and managers who must remain anonymous played *the* key role in setting up most of my contacts and interviews in Beijing, Benxi, Chongqing, Datong, Harbin, Luoyang, Shanghai, Shenyang, and Zhengzhou. I am forever thankful for their help.

Access to libraries and the help of librarians is key to any research. In particular, Yifeng Wu and all the staff of the Center for Chinese Studies Library at the University of California-Berkeley were extremely helpful in every stage of my research. At Beijing University, the staffs of the contemporary periodical room and the reference collections were also very helpful. Jean Hung and all the librarians at the Universities Service Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong maintain the world's finest social science collection on contemporary China and have never failed to welcome even early-stage graduate students with open arms and

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fabulous advice and support. David Helliwell, aided by an excellent staff, has expertly managed the Chinese collections at Oxford's Bodleian Library for over thirty years, providing unparalleled support for scholars and even specially purchasing materials useful for my research. I was also able to access important collections in the Shanghai Municipal Library and the National Library of China, for which I am grateful. Finally, during the stressful periods right before I submitted the final versions of the dissertation and manuscript, Sidnae Steinhart at Bowdoin, Meng-fen Su at the University of Texas at Austin, and the inter-library loan offices at both institutions, marshaled their resources and came through with crucial assistance.

Also usually unacknowledged, but tremendously important, are language teachers. I should thank all those who struggled to help me learn to function in Chinese, especially Yuming Guo and Chi-ch'ao Chao. Without their help, I could never have undertaken research in China.

No research can proceed without funding. I must thank for their generous support the National Security Education Program, Fulbright/IIE, the Harvard-Yenching Institute, the University of Hawai'i, Beijing University, the Urban China Research Network (based at SUNY-Albany), the British Academy, the University of California Institute for Labor and Employment, and the Center for Chinese Studies and Institute for International Studies (both at UC-Berkeley).

In addition to my advisers at Berkeley, many people offered comments on the manuscript. In particular, Marc Blecher, Mary Gallagher, Frank Pieke, Vivienne Shue, and Dorothy Solinger read all or nearly all of the manuscript in various forms and offered extremely helpful suggestions at many points. Additionally, the following people offered comments or critiques on substantial portions of my argument or text: Itty Abraham, John Armstrong, Caroline Arnold, Joseph Askew, Richard Baum, Richard Bense, Thomas Bernstein, Catherine Boone, Daniel Buck, Yongshun Cai, Adam Yuet Chau, Calvin Chen, Xi Chen, Robert Cliver, Rebecca Clothey, Thomas Conlan, Christian Constantin, Mark Dallas, Bruce Dickson, Dwight Dyer, Kenneth Foster, Paul Franco, Mark Frazier, Douglas Fuller, Dru Gladney, Judy Gruber, Amy Hanser, Scott Harold, Maranatha Ivanova, Frank Kehl, Scott Kennedy, Pierre Landry, Henry Lawrence, Ching Kwan Lee, Lianjiang Li, Kun-chin Lin, Xiaobo Lü, Patricia MacLachlan, Melanie Manion, Andrew Mertha, Ethan Michelson, Chung-in Moon, Adnan Naseemullah, Andrew Nathan, Jean Oi, Michel Oksenberg, Eileen Otis, Pan Wei, Grigore Pop-Eleches, Jack Porter, Marsha Pripstein-Posusney, Martin Rivlin, Jean-Louis Rocca, Matthew Rudolph, Rudra Sil, Victor Shih, Marcin Sobkowiak, Edward Steinfeld, Rachel Stern, Wenfang Tang,

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Murray Scot Tanner, Tao Ran, Sidney Tarrow, Patricia Thornton, Eric Thun, Kellee Tsai, Mark Vail, Carsten Vala, Andrew Walder, Andrew Wedeman, Kurt Weyland, Susan Whiting, Jaeyoun Won, Joseph Wong, Dali Yang, Jianjun Zhang, and Dingxin Zhao. While I appreciate all this help and advice, I remain responsible for all errors and deficiencies that remain in my work.

Much of Chapter 5 and small parts of Chapter 1 appeared originally as “Understanding Contentious Collective Action by Chinese Laid-off Workers: The Importance of Regional Political Economy,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 39/2 (2004), pp. 94–120. I am thankful to be able to reuse some of this material with the kind permission of Springer Science and Business Media.

I am very grateful to Rana Mitter for his friendship and help with many things at Oxford, but also for introducing me to Marigold Acland, who has been superb in her role as my editor at Cambridge University Press. She and others at Cambridge have been responsible for transforming this book from a set of rough Word documents into the finished product. Two anonymous reviewers also put great effort into making the book a success – one of them even provided detailed critical notes in the margins of nearly every page.

Lastly, I am thankful to my wife Ling and son Malcolm for being tremendously supportive of me throughout my research and writing, as well as immensely patient through all of the nights, weekends, and holidays I have had to spend making revisions. I dedicate this book to them.