

Atomized Incorporation

Atomized Incorporation examines why the Chinese regime selectively tolerates workers' collective action within single factories and what this means for the country's long-term political resilience. It investigates the implications of state-labor relations in contemporary China and suggests that it has evolved away from overt coercion to limited incorporation. Based on two years of in-depth fieldwork, Rho uncovers how ordinary workers think, believe, and behave in this changing socio-political environment. She demonstrates that labor grievances have become more politicized and finds that the current approach to economic grievance resolutions demobilizes the emergence of labor movements by rewarding those with collective action resources within individual workplaces. Rho argues that though this limited state of incorporation allows workers to express discontent at wages and working conditions, it also denies them the opportunity to make claims about structural problems and does not effectively enhance political loyalty in the long run.

Sungmin Rho is Associate Professor of International Relations and Political Science at The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. She also conducts policy-relevant research by collaborating with international organizations such as International Labor Organization (ILO).

Atomized Incorporation

Chinese Workers and the Aftermath of China's Rise

SUNGMIN RHO

*The Graduate Institute of International and
Development Studies*



Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-16120-6 — Atomized Incorporation
 Sungmin Rho
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009161206

DOI: 10.1017/9781009161183

© Sungmin Rho 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Rho, Sungmin, 1984– author.

TITLE: Atomized incorporation : chinese workers and the aftermath
 of china's rise / Sungmin Rho.

DESCRIPTION: 1 Edition. | New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2023. |
 Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022048466 | ISBN 9781009161206 (hardback) |
 ISBN 9781009161183 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Industrial policy – China. | Labor disputes – China. |
 Industrial relations – China. | Working class – Political activity – China.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC HD3616.C62 R46 2023 |

DDC 331.80951–dc23/eng/20230224

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022048466>

ISBN 978-1-009-16120-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgment</i>	x
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Central Arguments	3
1.2 Atomized Incorporation	6
1.3 Untangling Grievances	12
1.4 Particularistic Bargaining	16
1.5 Notes on Research Methodology	19
1.6 Structure of the Book	21
2 The Political Costs of Labor Coercion: The Changing Socioeconomic Environment since the 2000s	24
2.1 Political Economy of Labor Coercion	25
2.2 Labor Coercion in Post-reform China	28
2.3 Declining Effectiveness of Labor Coercion	36
2.4 Socioeconomic Conditions for Labor Assertiveness: Long-Term Consequences of Labor Coercion	43
3 Atomized Incorporation: Regime Response to the Changing Environment	46
3.1 China's Labor Control Strategy in a Comparative Perspective	47
3.2 Toward Atomized Incorporation	51
3.3 Atomized Incorporation in Post-reform China	62
3.4 Political Economy of Atomized Incorporation	76
3.5 Conclusion	93

4	Politicization of Labor Discontent and Blame Attribution	95
4.1	Debate about Migrant Labor Discontent	97
4.2	Politicization, Atomization, and Blame Attribution	98
4.3	Patterns of Blame Attribution	105
4.4	Conclusion	122
5	Workplace Mobilization and Collective Action	124
5.1	Barriers to Collective Action for Unorganized Workers	125
5.2	Protest Initiators in Chinese Factories	128
5.3	Understanding Heterogeneous Protest Intention	135
5.4	Conclusion	159
6	Interest-Based Collective Action and Firm-Level Patterns of Labor Protests	161
6.1	The Rise of Interest-Based Collective Action	163
6.2	Firm-Level Patterns of Labor Protests	166
6.3	Characteristics of Interest-Based Collective Action	177
6.4	Firm-Level Patterns of Blame Attribution	181
6.5	Conclusion	184
7	Discursive Opportunities and Collective Action at Law-Abiding Firms	186
7.1	Media Reports of Labor Protests	187
7.2	Perception of Media Exposure at Different Firms	193
7.3	Cases of Labor Protests	198
7.4	Broader Implications	211
8	State–Labor Relations in the Xi Era and Beyond	214
8.1	Atomized Incorporation in the Xi Era	216
8.2	Beyond Protests	227
	<i>Appendix I: Survey Dataset</i>	231
	<i>References</i>	235
	<i>Index</i>	257

Figures

2.1	Number of migrants	<i>page</i> 33
2.2	The ratio of available jobs to job seekers	37
3.1	The number of mentions of “peasant worker” in the title of <i>People’s Daily</i>	64
3.2	Profits of select industries in PRD	82
3.3	Value-added taxes of select industries in PRD	82
4.1	Reported perception of blame attribution: Who is to blame?	106
4.2	Reported perception of blame attribution by job position	108
4.3	Effect of economic and social grievances on blame attribution: Line supervisors	117
4.4	Effect of economic and social grievances on blame attribution: Rank-and-file workers	117
4.5	Effect of economic and social grievances on blame attribution: Alternative independent variable	119
4.6	The effect of protest behavior and information on blame attribution	121
5.1	Predicted effect on perception of better outside option	142
5.2	Protest intention by blame attribution and job position	152
5.3	Dependent variable: Have you participated in collective action?	157
5.4	Predicted effect of past participation on protest intention and determinants	158
6.1	Percentage of demands by year	173
6.2	Effect of <i>extra-legal</i> demands on protest tactics	178
6.3	Effects of protest demands and size on police presence	180
6.4	Effect of law score on blame attribution	183
7.1	Effect of law score on perceived group efficacy	194

7.2	Marginal effect of expected media exposure on perceived group efficacy	195
7.3	Marginal effect of law score on expected media exposure by job position	197
7.4	Does your firm produce internationally renowned brands?	198
8.1	Cases of labor protests by ownership	217
8.2	Cases of small-scale protests	218
8.3	Cases of labor protests by tactic	219
A.1	Geographic coverage of survey firms	233

Tables

2.1	Percentage of rural workers in nonagricultural sectors	<i>page 39</i>
4.1	Perceptions of upward mobility, inequality, and fairness	107
4.2	Multivariate analysis of blame attribution	109
4.3	Multivariate analysis of social grievances	113
5.1	I share the same interests with [...]	131
5.2	Are you willing to protest for a pay increase?	136
5.3	Sources of preferences for collective action (% agree)	138
5.4	Demographic characteristics of workers by job position	141
5.5	Determinants of protest intention	148
5.6	Effect of blame attribution on protest intention	153
5.7	Why did you not join the collective action?	155
6.1	Firm-level determinants of labor protests	169
6.2	Determinants of strike incidence at the firm level	171
6.3	Ownership and legal/extra-legal demands (% of protests)	174
6.4	Firm size and legal/extra-legal mobilization (% of protests)	175
6.5	Multivariate analysis of protest demands	176
6.6	Protest tactics	177
6.7	Determinants of police presence	179
7.1	Effects of firm ownership and size on workers' perceived chance of media attention	196
A.1	Basic firm-level characteristics by ownership	234

Acknowledgment

When I began working on my doctoral dissertation, I never imagined that it would take nearly a decade to publish this book. This book reflects my individual journey of striving to comprehend who we are and why we are here, as much as my academic pursuit as a learner and researcher.

I was blessed to have tremendous amounts of support, love, and encouragement throughout this journey. I owe my utmost appreciation to my PhD advisor at Stanford University, Jean Oi. My drive and determination alone would have been inadequate to finish my dissertation, let alone this book! Jean's constant enthusiasm for my research inspired me to turn my dissertation into this book. I sometimes feared her emails inquiring about the progress of my work, but she always gave me a safe environment when I felt disoriented and alone. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Michael Tomz for his unceasing guidance. When I was frantically running around the factories for my first survey and was teetering on the edge of a mental breakdown, I could go on because of his assurance and support. He met with me online even at a very late hour in California, examined the preliminary data with me, and assured me that I was not wasting my life. During my time at Stanford, I was fortunate to work with Professor Beatriz Magaloni, whose feedback was indispensable in building my theory and in situating my work in a comparative context. I am indebted to her advice and kindness. Professor Lisa Blaydes was always there to provide me with encouragement even after I moved to Geneva. Her advice about book publishing made the publication of this book possible.

My fieldwork in China is truly unforgettable and filled with gratitude and appreciation. First and foremost, I am deeply indebted to the

Acknowledgment

xi

interviewees who took the time to answer my questions and share their experiences with me. Any errors are solely my responsibility and I hope this project lives up to their kindness. Sung-hwa Jung at KOTRA went out of his way to help me. He assisted me not only in connecting with interviewees but also in exploring the new city. Young-hak Yim took care of me like his own daughter. He acquainted me with many of his peers and friends in China and expressed genuine support, which is still deeply ingrained in my heart. I would like to express my gratitude to the scholars that I met in China, including Ngok Kinglun, Wan Xiangdong, He Gaochao, Pun Ngai, Ellen David Friedman, and others. I was fortunate to receive their generosity and be part of stimulating discussions. My fieldwork days were often tiring and draining, but I always found comfort in seeing my friends. I am thankful for all the friends I crossed paths with in China.

This project was made possible by the generosity of numerous organizations. The Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies gave me financial assistance during my Ph.D. studies, and I could dedicate myself to research. The fellowships and grants provided by the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, the Center for International Security and Cooperation, and the Stanford Center at Peking University helped me to fund my fieldwork. I am grateful to the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University and the Center for the Study of Contemporary China at the University of Pennsylvania for the predoctoral and postdoctoral fellowship. Through their generous support, I was able to devote my time to writing and be immersed in an intellectually stimulating environment.

Without the encouragement of my colleagues and friends, it would not be possible for me to complete this long journey. I thank my friends at Stanford University and the University of Pennsylvania. My friends in Geneva have accompanied me through the exhausting days of writing this book and have always supported me. My colleagues at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies gave me constructive feedback and showed their trust. I feel truly blessed to be part of a community that is both supportive and inspiring. Many people read different versions of this book and helped me strengthen my arguments. I am grateful to the audiences at Stanford University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Bern, University of Geneva, and International Labor Organization. Didi Egerton-Warburton gave excellent editing that significantly improved the book's writing. I would also like to extend special thanks to the book workshop participants, Mary Gallagher, Xiaobo Lü, Peter

Lorentzen, and Jean Oi. They read the entire manuscript and provided detailed comments even amid the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank Robert Dreesden at Cambridge University Press for supporting this project as well as three anonymous reviewers for offering detailed and thoughtful feedback. Robert Judkins and Sunantha Ramamoorthy provided me with assistance and instruction in the editing and production of the book.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My sister Seunghwa Rho was an incredible source of moral support, and I could always count on her, even when I had no clue about statistical models. My parents, Boocho Rho and Hyojoo Yoh, gave me a safe place to come back to. I embarked on this journey because I was curious about a different society and way of life. This curiosity also led me to obstacles and challenges – many of them unexpected – but I was able to take risks and make mistakes because I knew they were always there for me. Through them, I came to understand a life of love, humor, and devotion. I dedicate this book to them.

Sungmin Rho