

Yongshun Cai (2006) *State and Laid-off Workers in Reform China: The Silence and Collective Action of the Retrenched*. New York, NY: Routledge. 193 pages. ISBN 9780415368889.

China's economic reforms bring about massive political participation and collective resistance in the urban areas, especially in the state-owned sectors. When the lifetime employment system crumbled in the accelerated process of privatisation after the 1997 Party congress, the massive scale of retrenchment gave rise to widespread urban resistance and protests. Cai attempts to explain why some laid-off workers (LOWs) remain silent, whereas others take action in response to being laid off.

First, Cai finds that deprivation and dissatisfaction alone did not constitute incentives strong enough to drive laid-off workers to take actions. Instead, the workers' decision on whether to join collective action was, to a larger extent, based on a cost-benefit calculation. In other words, laid-off workers behaved as typical rational actors. Joining any collective action has its minimum costs: the action at least requires the time and energy which could be used otherwise to make money. As such, unless workers have confidence that the relevant benefits outweigh the costs, they would prefer to accept their suffering in silence.

Second, Cai finds that worker resistance depends upon the interaction between workers and the prospective targets of their collective action — the enterprise or the local government. It is also determined by how workers interact. In fact, this argument is consistent with Cai's latest article on how the divided power structure balances the concession-repression dilemma (*British Journal of Political Science*, 2008, 38(3): 411–432).

In China, despite the authoritarian regime, there are opportunities for civil resistance arising from the political arrangements that create disparate priorities between different levels of government. Specifically, higher-level authorities are more concerned with social stability and regime legitimacy, while lower-level authorities are more responsible for policy implementation and local issues. When those at the lower level ignore citizens' interests and provoke their resistance, those at the higher level may have an incentive to intervene in favour of the citizens. The possibility of intervention by higher-level authorities prevents local authorities from adopting excessive repression and, thus, becomes a *constraint* on lower-level authorities, creating opportunities for civil resistance. In Cai's case, this constraint on the local government shapes LOWs' perception of the government and boosts their confidence to take action.

On the other hand, higher-level authorities also prevent local authorities from adopting unconditional concessions and, thus, become a *constraint* on the resisters as well. In other words, if the local government believes that collective action poses a threat on their own interests, it can still resort to a range of responses to punish these mass resistances. Otherwise, the unconditional concessions will lead to greater resistances and be interpreted as signs of weakness. In Cai's case, this constraint on the resisters shapes LOWs' nature of actions (i.e., small-scaled, short-lived and isolated) and their inability to stop the reform.

Based on these observations, Cai concludes that the workers' resistance is often "individual-firm based, small-scaled, non-contentious and short-lived" (p. 117) and this accounts for the reason why massive lay-offs did not pose a serious challenge to the social and political stability in China in the 1990s. Realising that LOWs from large state-owned enterprises (SOEs) are more able to take forceful and organised action than the ones from

small SOEs due to their fewer constraints in mobilisation and greater capability to produce organisers, the central government implemented a policy of 'retaining the large SOEs and letting go of the small ones' and set the privatisation of small SOEs as the major target of the reform in the 1990s. As a result, the frequency of large-scale resistance had been significantly reduced. However, the difficulties in restructuring large SOEs also slowed down the reforms in some crucial industrial sector in the 2000s.

The way of laying off is also important. Cai distinguishes two modes of laying off, simultaneous and sequential, and argues that simultaneous lay-offs are more likely to lead to collective action than sequential lay-offs because the longer time lapse of sequential lay-offs prevents the emergence of leaders and, thus, reduces the strength of LOWs' shared identity, while simultaneous lay-offs may readily provoke previous enterprise cadres to become organisers of workers' collective action.

One new finding of Cai's book is the role of leaders or organisers in workers' resistance. According to Cai, a successful occurrence of collective actions is pre-conditioned on two necessary mechanisms: the presence of leaders or organisers, and the existence of a sufficient number of prospective participants. Specifically, the scale of participation often determines the political orientation of mobilised groups, while organisers often facilitate information dissemination, inspire confidence among participants and articulate their demands when dealing with the government.

Then, a natural question emerges: why do those people want to play these roles? For LOWs, personal ambition is no longer important in the struggle for economic benefits. Instead, it seems that those who normally enjoy more prestige and social status among the workers feel pressured to take on the responsibility to lead. This explains why current or previous cadres often become the natural organisers of workers' collective action.

However, Cai fails to explicitly explore the ideological orientation and political background of these protest leaders, especially of these current or previous enterprise cadres. How many leaders are Party members or even high-level Party cadres? How does their Party member's status influence their decision to serve as a resistance leader? If a former Party member leads the resistance, will more workers be motivated to participate in the action?

These questions are important because, generally speaking, many of managers in the SOEs are members of the Party and their job promotions or even political careers are closely linked to their performance. Even when these cadres are laid off, they are more likely to find a new job based on their Party member status and previous performance. However, being an organiser does not bring a person more 'good performances' but puts them in a risky situation.

Overall, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the collective actions by China's workers.

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