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Cultural Values in the Making: Governing through Intangible Heritage

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

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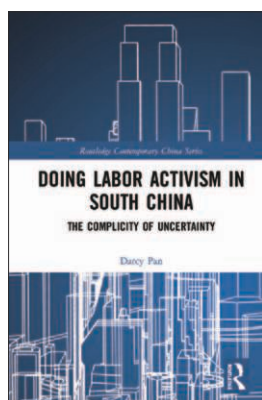
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SMITH, Chris, and Ngai PUN. 2006. "The Dormitory Labour Regime in China as a Site for Control and Resistance." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 17(8): 1456-70.

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).



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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

discourse practices and understandings of the state as a ubiquitous presence against which any social activity must be measured. On the other hand, NGOs thrive within the grey areas of state-sanctioned activism. Some of the examples presented in the book clearly illustrate how the Chinese state, by outsourcing workers' protection to the NGOs, implicitly legitimises their existence.

Pan's application of anthropological theory, one major example of which is Herzfeld's (2016) notion of cultural intimacy, is consistent and well explained, accessible to readers who have not mastered the subject. However, one important point that could be further developed is the institutional domain of NGO-state relations. As an anthropologist, Pan focuses on how non-state actors perceive and negotiate the idea of the state among themselves, rather than on how they engage with it. Increased methodological dialogue with other disciplines could provide further explanation of the macro-dynamics of contention on institutional ground. After all, labour movements act on political institutions. A multi-disciplinary approach may also contribute to investigating how NGO-state relations change by mission: for instance, there may be a difference between how labour and environmental NGOs deal and are dealt with. Normally, time and space constraints prevent authors from weighing all these different angles and hypotheses, but this additional level of comparative analysis could further complement the study of NGO activity in Mainland China and Hong Kong.

At the time of writing, China's workforce is witnessing profound change. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the transformation of capital-labour relations by stimulating the rise of e-commerce and online industry. Chinese migrant workers are now filling the ranks of a new type of working-class, facing precarious labour conditions and derisory legal protection. Such circumstances are quickly translating into new demands and protests over poor working conditions, with one recent example involving strikes by couriers and food delivery workers.¹ Similarly, Hong Kong has seen a remarkable rise in unionisation,² spurred by both the pandemic and the 2019 protests. As these trends promise future developments in Chinese labour advocacy, Pan's book may be an excellent starting point for educating oneself on the micro-dynamics of NGO activity.

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2. "Annual Statistical Report of Trade Unions in Hong Kong," *Labour Department*, 28 October 2020, <https://data.gov.hk/en-data/dataset/hk-ld-rtu-rtu-annual-stats/resource/4f69d6a5-e9eb-4ac6-aa86-20eaeae58272> (accessed on 3 January 2021).



THIREAU, Isabelle. 2020. *Des lieux en commun. Une ethnographie des rassemblements publics en Chine (Places in Common: An Ethnography of Public Gatherings in China)*. Paris: Éditions EHESS.

FLORENCE GRAEZER BIDEAU

Reviewing research whose subjects echo one's own work is a fascinating and stimulating exercise. *Des lieux en commun* resonates in fact with two ethnographic studies I carried out in Beijing, one in the mid-1990s on the collective dance of *yangge* (秧歌), and the other more recently on the controversial renovation of the district of Gulou. Isabelle Thireau's volume deals with Tianjin. Based on an immersive fieldwork, the author presents two distinct experiences of public gatherings. The first is the daily meetings in Shengli Square, a space used for group physical exercise as much as for socialising among its members; the second is for activities relating to the protection of the cultural heritage of historic Tianjin. What the experiences have in common is the mutual presence of several social actors, who come together in a more or less structured way, and a sharing of know-how related to their engagement in urban space and civil society.

The focal point of her study concerns the modalities of "doing things together" and the capacity of action of those taking part in these gatherings. The author emphasises with great finesse the close connections between knowledge and action, and the importance for citizens of making visible a public history of the urban and social changes of which they are at once witnesses and actors. The comparisons made between these two situations are ingeniously documented via several significant entry points for the communities concerned. They reveal not only the differences between these two forms of public gathering, which both fall along a continuum of participatory initiatives, but also the respective issues at stake and the fragile legitimacy of their actions in a relatively uncertain sociopolitical context.

Divided into two parts, each of which contains extracts from interviews as well as ethnographic descriptions, the work relates in meticulous detail the common experiences of an apprenticeship in and a familiarisation with public action carried out by those participating in the gatherings.

The first part delves into the daily "keep healthy" meetings on Shengli Square in the district of Heping between 2011 and 2017. The author insists at the outset on the social and geographical heterogeneity of its members in order to better highlight the forms taken by the different types of engagement between familiarity and strangeness within the "spontaneous" group. The specific modalities of interaction and communication (how people position themselves, greet each other, move around, take leave, go off together, etc.) designed for "doing things together" are all instances of a common know-how made up of practices and shared norms that progressively form into a pattern of behaviour. People do their exercise and