



The Circular State - The Symbolic Labor Politics in Transitional China



Written by
Xiuying Cheng

Horizon Research Publishing, USA

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Abstract

The restructuring of SOEs (State Owned Enterprises) in China produced a great deal of labor contentions. How to manage the workers and control the labor conflicts after the collapsing of the work unit system became a big challenge to the state's stability and legitimacy during the transition to the market economy. This book attempts to explore the structure and functioning of this state in transition from the particular perspective of the interaction between the state and its workers.

Based on the ethnographical research in central China, it offered a comparative case study of two groups of workers (the state workers vs. the temporary workers), especially the concrete processes of their struggles, including street protests, office petitions and court litigations. The radical protesters on the streets would be directed into the petition offices, which would further refer or push the workers to the courts to seek clear judgement. When the conflict could not reach a conclusion at the local level, the workers would petition to the central government, which would certainly refer them back to the local.

The process of the workers' struggles displayed a circular state composing of four intersecting circles: the circle between petition offices, the circle between courts, the circle between petition offices and courts, and the circle between the center and the local. This circular state only circulated the cases of labor conflicts, instead of resolving them, but it turned the material requests from the workers into discursive struggles about justifications, and thus transformed the radical confrontation between the labor and the capital into peaceful communications.

This containment of labor conflicts was not an oppressive process simply to quench down the workers' resistance, but instead a productive process to promote the statist capitals, such as the state policies and state laws, and produce the imagination of the state. During the active engagement with the state agents, the challenging workers gradually learned to use the dominant and official languages to frame their requests, interpret their positions and realign their relations to the state. This symbolic domination was the crucial mechanism for the state to manage and control the contentious workers during the period of transition.

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Overview of the Book

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