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Labour resistance and worker attitudes towards trade union reform in China

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing its arguments and conclusion from a ten-year survey on workers' experiences of labour disputes, along with anticipation of trade union reform, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the interaction between labour resistance and its potential for institutional change in the field of labour relations in China.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper uses a longitudinal cohort study carried out between 2006 and 2015. The survey was conducted every two years, specifically in 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2015, in Guangdong Province, China. Questionnaire and interview methods were used; 2,166 valid sample questionnaires were collected, and 215 interviews were carried out over the research period.

Findings – An increase in collectivized disputes in China has given rise to an escalation of labour action, characterized by wildcat strikes. Joint action has strengthened the bonds among work colleagues, and it has become more important for workers to pay attention to their rights and interests. In terms of organization, two viewpoints towards union reform were revealed: the pragmatist and the idealist perspectives. Workers with greater experience of resistance were more modest in terms of demands for union reform, while workers with some experience called for their union's independence from the party-state.

Research limitations/implications – The data contained industry bias, as too many respondents were from electronics-manufacturing and textile and apparel plants.

Originality/value – This paper is original, and increases awareness of the development of the labour movement in China.

Keywords China, Industrial relations, Trade unions, Labour movement, Labour resistance, Wildcat strike

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Industrialization leads to labour resistance and the development of a labour movement to check the power of capital as well as that of the state (Silver, 2003). In the past four decades, in authoritarian states where trade unionism is completely state-controlled and freedom of association is repressed, the combined force of globalization and industrialization has not only fuelled worker insurgency but has also driven workers to organize independently outside of the official trade unions, so that independent labour unionism has come to the forefront, as has been seen during the democratization process in South Korea, Mexico and Taiwan (Koo, 2001; Solinger, 2001; Soonok, 2003). Experience of joint struggle plays an essential role in raising the group consciousness of workers, whose demands have evolved from the economic to the political (Koo, 2001; Silver, 2003). Labour resistance acts as a catalyst to translate grassroots discontent into institutional change.

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Being the world's second-largest economy as well as its most populous country, China provides a valuable opportunity to explore the interaction between labour resistance and worker pressure on state-controlled unitary trade unionism. China has experienced fast industrialization, along with rampant domestic marketization, since the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) introduced a reform and openness policy in 1978. In the field of labour relations, confrontation among different actors has emerged, while the CPC has endeavoured to retain its political supremacy within the party-state system (Gallagher, 2005). Independent trade unions are prohibited. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and its lower-level subordinates are the only officially recognized trade unions (Trade Union Law of China, 2001, Arts. 2 and 4); they function as a "transmission belt", or conduit, connecting labour with the party-state by conveying CPC's orders to workers and transmitting workers' opinions up to the party-state level (Clarke and Pringle, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Liu, 2007; Pringle, 2011; Taylor and Li, 2007).

As China integrates further into the global economy, labour resistance is intensifying, and official trade unionism is under pressure to reform (Feng, 2010). Between 1996 and 2014, labour dispute cases jumped by nearly 15 times to 715,163, with 267,165 workers involved in collective disputes (Department of Population and Employment Statistics National Bureau of Statistics and Department of Planning and Finance Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2016, pp. 344-345). Wildcat strikes have become common because Chinese law does not grant the right to strike to workers and the ACFTU shies away from labour resistance (Chen, 2010; Friedman and Lee, 2010; Pringle, 2011). There were also 2,772 wildcat strikes in 2015, 15 times more than in 2011 (China Labour Bulletin, 2016). Moreover, the nature of the strikes is being transformed from rights-based claims, such as wage arrears complaints, to more interest-oriented action, such as demanding annual wage increases and enterprise trade union reform (Elfstrom and Kuruville, 2014). Worker organizations, e.g. labour non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and workers' same-town fellow associations, offer a chance for workers to organize outside of the ACFTU system and pursue collectively their rights and interests (Chan, 2010; Friedman, 2014; Pringle, 2013).

Hence, many researchers believe that increasing labour actions are the result of rising group consciousness among Chinese workers (Becker, 2014; Chan, 2010; Chan and Pun, 2009; Chang and Brown, 2013; Chang and Qiao, 2009; Elfstrom and Kuruville, 2014; Friedman, 2014; Gray and Jang, 2015; Pringle, 2013; Wang, 2015), and that the previously fragmented labour struggle is evolving more towards coordinated and normalized insurgency (Friedman, 2014), which paves the way for the formation of a worker-oriented labour movement (Pringle, 2013). In such circumstances, the ACFTU system must either reform itself to be more responsive to labour, or end up failing to represent workers, who have already begun to organize independently to replace the official unions (Wang, 2015). Thus, Chinese trade unions will not prosper simply by continuing to undertake a conduit role between the CPC and Chinese workers (Chang and Brown, 2013; Chang and Qiao, 2009; Feng, 2010; Li, 2008; Pringle, 2011).

Nevertheless, the Chinese party-state cannot be overlooked in this process. The behaviour of the state can either disturb or encourage worker action. In formerly communist Poland, for example, the Polish party-state first recognized and then repressed Solidarity, a trade union organized independently by workers in the Gdansk shipyards, and finally ignited a nation-wide resistance that brought down state socialism (Laba, 1991). In China, the enactments of various labour legislations over the last decade have provided a political opportunity for workers to express openly their

discontents and to launch collective action (Becker, 2014; Chang and Brown, 2013; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Gallagher, 2006; Liu *et al.*, 2011); and the number of collective disputes and wildcat strikes has soared since the issue of several labour laws in 2008 (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014), despite the CPC trying initially to use the laws as part of its governing toolkit to resolve labour discontent and de-collectivize workers (Friedman and Lee, 2010). In this sense, the behaviour of the Chinese party-state can exert huge influence over workers. In the field of unionization, the CPC shows no willingness to ease the prohibition of plural unionism (Communist Party of China, 2015), and there has been no sign of a change in relationship between the ACFTU system and the Chinese party-state (ACFTU, 2015). In addition, in 2015, a number of labour NGO leaders were arrested under criminal charges in Guangdong Province, the most industrialized area of the country, while the CPC's security apparatus was reported to have repeatedly harassed worker activists, closed down their offices and called off their pro-worker activities (Howell, 2015; Xu, 2013).

In the light of this, some researchers do not expect that worker organization outside of the ACFTU system will have any material influence on labour relations, since the Chinese party-state is overwhelmingly strong and the power relations between the ACFTU and other worker organizations such as labour NGOs are asymmetric (Friedman, 2014; Friedman and Lee, 2010; Pringle, 2011; Xu, 2013). Despite the rising labour unrest, they feel that Chinese workers are not ready to challenge the order of the market, and will continue to affiliate themselves under the party-state (Feng, 2010; Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007; Zheng, 2010), which then remains capable of guiding the development of the labour movement (Shi, 2010). The continuous bottom-up pressure for institutional change is weak, and therefore, the ACFTU system can maintain its role as a conduit.

Furthermore, researchers argue that the Chinese party-state – which is more capable of handling political societal challenges than other authoritarian regimes (Halper, 2010) – often stays ahead of changes in labour relations, and can thus reduce the strength of labour resistance by issuing new labour laws and initiating state-guided union reform. In this way, it can incorporate labour discontents into the official resolution channel under the party-state system (Chang, 2013; Wen, 2014) and prevent the expansion of independent worker organizations. In the past decade, by introducing trade union reforms to allow some degree of grassroots union democracy in the form of direct election (Hui and Chan, 2015; Wen, 2014), as well as collective bargaining, the ACFTU has tried to be more responsive to worker demands and to quieten labour discontents (Clarke and Pringle, 2009; Feng, 2010; Pringle, 2011) without the necessity of making any fundamental change to its relationship with the CPC. Although various studies also point out that neither the union's direct election nor collective bargaining actually empowers workers at the workplace level (Chan and Hui, 2014; Howell, 2008; Hui and Chan, 2015; Wu, 2012), counter-action from workers, such as labour disputes and wildcat strikes, is not decisive enough to alter the current configuration of Chinese labour relations, which are unlikely to nurture an independent labour movement outside of the party-state (Zheng, 2010). In fact, a recently appointed vice president of the ACFTU with a migrant worker background openly admitted that he was informed about the appointment by the CPC only one month beforehand, and had simply filled in a personnel form to occupy the position (Xiao, 2016).

However, there has been little in the way of comprehensive primary data to track the changing awareness and expectations of Chinese workers towards independent organization, as well as official Chinese trade unionism, through their continuing

experiences of labour resistance (Elfstrom and Kuruville, 2014). Most studies have either relied on a case study approach (e.g. Chang and Brown, 2013; Chen, 2010; Gray and Jang, 2015; Lee, 2007; Wen, 2014), which risks showing only the exceptional stories and missing the big picture, or have used short-term surveys (e.g. Chang and Qiao, 2009; Gallagher, 2006; Liu *et al.*, 2011) that may offer a large sample size but not disclose changes over a longer time period, and may therefore, not be sufficient to provide researchers with practical analysis on the relationship between labour resistance and worker pressure on trade union reform in China.

Drawing its arguments and conclusion from a ten-year cohort study between 2006 and 2015 on workers' experiences of labour disputes, along with their anticipations of trade union reform, this paper discusses the interaction between labour resistance and its potential for institutional change in the field of labour relations in China. The paper has five parts. The first lays out the research method; the second sketches how the nature of labour disputes has evolved from individualized grievance towards collectivized discontent; and then arising out of this, the third part describes increased labour militancy, as well as a rising group consciousness among workers, that is, characterized by a rise in both wildcat strikes and in workers' mutual support during strikes. The fourth part then explores worker expectations about the ACFTU system and its reform, illustrating the experience of how strikes affect workers' expectations about organization while separating the surveyed workers into two categories (a politically pragmatic group and an idealistic one). The final part discusses the potential of labour resistance to change contemporary trade unionism in China from the viewpoint of the workers.

Methodology

A longitudinal cohort study approach was used between 2006 and 2015. The target sample group was defined to have the following four characteristics:

- (1) They were rural labour migrants leaving their home villages for urban destinations in order to work, since there are 273.95 million migrant workers in China, or two-thirds of the country's workforce (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2015), and migrant workers have been shown to be active in labour resistance (Chan, 2010; Friedman, 2014; Pringle, 2013).
- (2) They were aged below 28, since young migrant workers have been reported to be more active in labour resistance (Chang and Brown, 2013; Pringle, 2013), and the CPC categorizes people aged between 14 and 28 as youths (Chinese Communist Youth League Charter, 2013, Art. 1).
- (3) They worked in large enterprises with more than 1,000 employees at the time of the survey, as workers in such companies have a greater capability to launch influential action for social and institutional change, as has been seen in other authoritarian and former communist countries (Koo, 2001; Laba, 1991).
- (4) They had experienced, or were experiencing, labour disputes, as experience is a critical factor in the development of labour movements (Chan, 2010; Pringle, 2013).

The survey was conducted every two years between 2006 and 2015, specifically in 2006, 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2015, in Guangdong Province, the most industrialized region with the most migrant workers in the country. Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Dongguan and Huizhou municipalities, four major industrial centres in Guangdong Province, were visited

over the research period. A team of two or three researchers randomly approached workers in front of labour dispute resolution agency buildings, such as labour dispute arbitration courts and judicial courts, as well as the government's legal aid facilities, between June and September of each research year.

Questionnaire and interview methods were used. If a worker fitted all the four characteristics above, researchers would ask her/him to fill out a questionnaire and then ask whether the worker was willing to be interviewed. In each research year, 500 questionnaires were distributed. The structure and main questions in the questionnaires were the same, so as to consistently acquire the following information about workers:

- (1) Personal details, such as gender, age, education and family information.
- (2) Personal experience of labour disputes, including whether the dispute was settled, how the dispute was settled, whether the workers were satisfied with the results, etc.
- (3) Personal experience of strikes, such as how successful a strike was, why workers chose to join or not to join a strike, etc.
- (4) Ideas of worker organization and official trade unions, including personal judgement about how trade unions work, how they should be improved, etc.

Over the research period, 2,166 qualified sample questionnaires were collected, with a total response rate of 86.64 per cent. Among the sampled workers, 79.0 per cent came from the electronic manufacturing industry and 15.05 per cent worked in the textile and apparel sector; 2,147 respondents had completed their middle-school level education and 60.0 per cent were female. As national statistics show that more than 70 per cent of young Chinese migrant workers have completed their middle-school education (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013, 2015) and that the electronics, along with the textile and apparel, industries prefer to recruit women workers (Chan, 2010; Liu and Wan, 2007), the sample reflected the reality of the labour force in China.

Apart from the questionnaire, researchers also carried out a semi-structured in-depth interview to ask workers for detailed reasons behind their choices on the questionnaire. After a worker had completed the questionnaire, researchers would ask her/him for an interview. If the worker agreed, the researchers would conduct the interview in a private place at the worker's convenience, such as a teahouse, café, restaurant or workers' dormitory. In each research year, researchers tried to interview 50 workers. In total, 215 interviews were accomplished over the research period. The interviews were conducted in the Chinese language and lasted for 1-1.5 hours. In 2006 and 2008, researchers taped the interviews, but in the later years they stopped tape recording and instead took intensive written notes that were later developed into interview transcripts for content analysis. This was due to several interventions from the authorities that made tape recording difficult and that caused researchers to be concerned about the political risks of potentially exposing the identity of the interviewees.

One shortcoming of the study is that the data are industry-biased, since too many respondents were from electronics-manufacturing and textile and apparel plants, making it harder to carry out cross-industry comparison. In practice, migrant workers have a variety of job choices, and many labour disputes and worker insurgencies take place in the construction (Becker, 2014) and automobile industries (Gray and Jang, 2015). In this sample pool, construction and automobile workers, along with

workers from other industries, were therefore, under-represented. It would be useful for future research to take the same approach as this paper but to cover more industries, so as to better represent the labour environment in China.

Findings

Increase in collectivized dispute and labour action

The entrenchment of globalization, marketization and industrialization often leads to rising labour discontent. In this process, the state plays an essential part. Prior to the enactment of a range of labour legislations, such as the Labour Contract Law of China in 2008, labour action was fragmented, with few migrant workers bringing collective labour dispute or coordinating collective worker action, and workers usually choosing to quit their current jobs for new employment when they had grievances in the workplace (Liu and Wan, 2007), without first putting up a fight. Table I illustrates that, in 2006, one-third of the surveyed workers reported that there were more than ten work colleagues involved in the same dispute. However, the percentage almost doubled in 2008, when the new laws came into effect. In 2011, nearly two-thirds of the workers said their disputes involved more than ten other people from work. The percentages further jumped to 94.4 and 95.6 per cent in 2013 and 2015, respectively. An increase in collectivized labour disputes makes it possible for workers to share their common discontents at the same workplace, as well as to conduct joint action.

Becker (2014) found that migrant workers were quite active in associating with each other when involved in a labour dispute, because migrant workers inclined to rely on their work colleagues to provide support. Having similar experiences of labour disputes strengthens the ties among migrant workers. As shown in Table II, colleagues at work

Table I.
How many work
colleagues were there
with you in your
labour dispute?
(2006-2015)

Years	Sample	Fewer than ten workers		More than ten workers	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
2006	411	287	69.8	124	30.2
2008	422	180	42.7	242	57.3
2011	407	102	25.1	305	74.9
2013	449	25	5.6	424	94.4
2015	477	21	4.4	456	95.6

Table II.
Who provided the
most effective
support for workers
during labour
dispute? (2006-2015)

Source of support	2006		2008		2011		2013		2015	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Colleague at work	78	19.0	144	33.9	204	50.1	297	66.1	301	63.1
Fellow townsman	141	34.3	123	28.9	97	23.8	90	20.0	75	15.7
Family	145	35.3	40	9.4	42	10.3	21	4.7	20	4.2
Friend in society	31	7.5	79	18.6	40	9.8	21	4.7	22	4.6
Fellow townsmen's association	9	2.2	6	1.4	12	2.9	12	2.7	9	1.9
Religious group	7	1.7	5	1.2	3	0.9	8	1.8	10	2.1
Government	0	0	14	3.3	5	1.2	0	0	23	4.8
Trade union	0	0	14	3.3	4	1.0	0	0	15	3.1
Total	411	100	422	100	407	100	449	100	477	100

become increasingly important for the surveyed workers when resolving their disputes. Between 2006 and 2015, the percentage of workers saying that work colleagues provided the most effective support rose by 44.1 to 63.1 per cent. At the same time, the importance of family decreased from 35.3 to 4.2 per cent, since other family members probably possessed the same information as the workers, and so could not provide any new perspective to assist them (Becker, 2014). The change demonstrates a process of labour solidarity, with industrialization and marketization gradually laying the foundation for group consciousness among workers, and consolidating individual workers into a homogeneous group. Contrary to the argument that Chinese migrant workers are unable to unite because their farmland in rural hometowns always offer an alternative, thus reducing their incentive to act together (Hurst, 2009; Lee, 2007), this paper shows that the conditions for a workplace-initiated mutual support network among migrant workers are in place.

Table II also reveals the low credibility of the Chinese Government and ACFTU system among the surveyed workers. Despite some fluctuations, the percentage of workers regarding the government and trade union as most helpful was never higher than 7.9 per cent, while in 2006 and 2013 no surveyed workers said that the government or trade union provided their most effective support. In fact, Chinese labour law often has high standards according to the written regulations, but the implementation of these standards is quite poor and can discredit the state in the view of the workers (Friedman and Lee, 2010; Gallagher, 2005). As disclosed by Gallagher (2006), the CPC's behaviour in introducing and disseminating labour laws has not only informed workers about their rights, but has also boosted their dissatisfaction about the official system – which was criticized as inefficient and half-hearted in helping workers – and convinced workers to act proactively to achieve their rights and interests. Therefore, the more laws that are passed, the greater the discontent among workers can be.

Dissatisfaction raises the likelihood of workers acting and organizing outside of the party-state and ACFTU system. Figure 1 displays how workers resolved their most recent labour disputes[1]. Between 2006 and 2013, more disputes were settled through the official channels than ever, yet the number of workers getting their disputes settled through wildcat strikes kept increasing. In 2015, 47.5 per cent of respondents settled their disputes through wildcat strikes, while 48.5 per cent resolved disputes through the official channels. Following the collectivization of labour disputes, and because of the low level of trust of workers in the state and the official trade union, workers are more likely to take their own actions for realizing their demands rather than depending on the procedures set by the

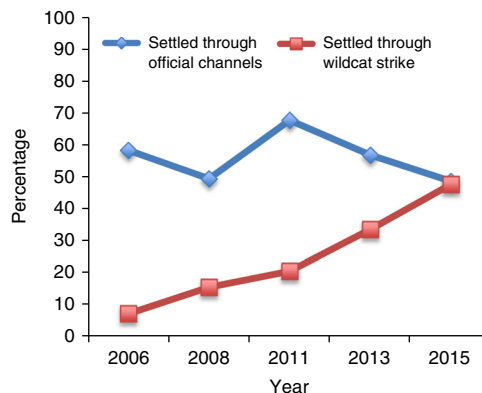


Figure 1.
How did workers
solve their most
recent disputes?

party-state or passively waiting for the resolution decisions made by the judicial systems, as was witnessed in many cases of labour resistance (Becker, 2014; Chan, 2010; Friedman, 2014). A 24-year-old female worker from an electronic manufacturing factory said:

Who didn't have the experience of (wildcat) strike?! I joined at least three strikes. I am so confident in joining strikes. Sometimes, a strike is small. Sometimes, a strike is big. Whatever you (workers) do, you cannot sit back and wait for someone else to solve your labour dispute for you. You must act on it, and express openly that you and your work colleagues are struggling. Then, others like the boss, government, lawyers and judges will come and listen to you. You don't write the law, so you cannot expect those with power and wealth to act on your behalf – unless you take action (23/7/2013, Shenzhen No. 15).

Enhancement of group consciousness

As workers start to look beyond the legal framework for extra-legal ways to express their discontent, wildcat strikes have become a regular form of resistance (Friedman, 2014). Migrant workers are now more confident in joining wildcat strikes. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of the surveyed migrant workers with experience of joining more than two wildcat strikes jumped tenfold between 2006 and 2015. Experience of labour disputes triggers labour action, and it provides an opportunity for workers to develop a group consciousness outside of the party-state and ACFTU system.

Joint action also tightens the bonds between workers, and labour demands escalate. Table III illustrates the rising confidence and group awareness among the surveyed

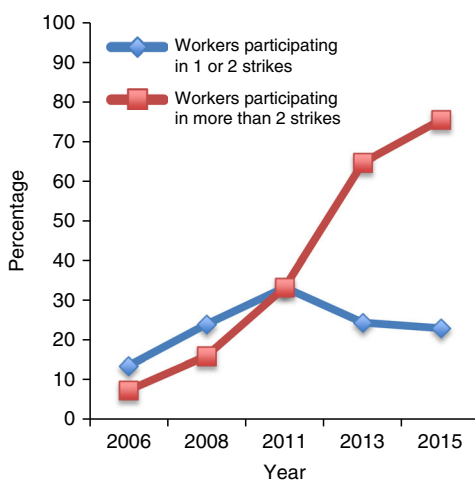


Figure 2.
Workers
participating
in wildcat strikes
(2006-2015)

Years	Reason 1	%	Reason 2	%	Reason 3	%
2006	Get back unpaid wage	52.8	Improve work conditions	25.1	Voice at workplace	13.9
2008	Get back unpaid wage	46.2	Improve work conditions	25.1	Voice at workplace	18.0
2011	Improve work conditions	38.1	Wage increase	37.6	Voice at workplace	17.7
2013	Improve work conditions	32.7	Wage increase	32.1	Support my work colleagues	24.3
2015	Wage increase	39.0	Support my work colleagues	35.0	Voice at workplace	21.8

Table III.
The most important
reason of a worker
to join a wildcat
strike (2006-2015)

workers, who were asked why they decided to join a strike. Before 2011, the workers went on strike mainly for defensive reasons, such as getting their unpaid wages back or asking employers to improve work conditions: more than two-thirds of the respondents struck to “get back unpaid wage” and “improve work conditions”. The picture started to change in 2011, when “wage increase” jumped to the second most popular reason to strike. Although there were more workers joining a strike to “improve work conditions” than to demand a “wage increase” in 2011 and 2013, the percentage of the former decreased, and wage arrears fell out of the three most popular reasons after 2008. In 2015, a “wage increase” was the most important reason for the surveyed workers to go on strike, with 39 per cent making this choice. In addition, another 21.8 per cent struck to demand for a “voice at workplace” in 2015, almost 10 per cent more than in 2006. This presents an increasing decisiveness of the workers to engage in workplace issues. Furthermore, joining a strike to “support my work colleagues”, a key factor of labour solidarity, became increasingly popular. In 2015, 35 per cent of the surveyed workers struck to support other workers, 10 per cent more than that in 2013, and made this the second most important reason to strike – while, before 2013, striking to “support my work colleagues” was not among the three most popular reasons. Other empirical studies on migrant worker resistance have demonstrated a similar trajectory (Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Gray and Jang, 2015). Recently, however, China’s economy slowed down for the first time since the CPC introduced a reform and openness policy in 1978. Many workers went on strike for severance payment and social insurance, following factory closure or relocation. Worker resistance may turn to be more defensive under the period of economic recession. Yet, this survey disclosed a continuous confidence of workers in launching offensive action. On the one hand, although the Chinese economy encountered some problems, China’s GDP growth rate was 6.9 per cent in 2015, higher than most Western and emerging economies. On the other hand, this survey only collected data from large companies, many of which were not fatally affected by the current economic slowdown. In fact, the CPC issued a new five-year development plan in 2016 to increase the competitive advantages of large manufacturing companies through strong policy incentives (Communist Party of China, 2016). In light of this, the workers on this survey did not face to harsh conditions like factory closure or relocation, as their counterparts in small- and medium-sized enterprises did. The wildcat strikes in large companies, as recorded on this survey, still presented a transition from defensiveness towards offensiveness.

Experience of striking makes workers realize the necessity of solidarity so that they can be more confident in rising up to make their voices heard. A 27-year-old male worker explained why he joined a strike:

People must have consciousness. They (strike leaders) started the strike for all workers. If workers could not stand up together, all were in vain. Workers had to support each other during strike, not only for the interests of others, but also for the interests of themselves. This means mutual help among work colleagues (19/8/2009, Guangzhou No. 38).

Another 22-year-old female worker carried on:

Time has changed. [...] We strike not only when employers violate the law, but also when they fail to respect the value of workers. Today, employers do not dare to defer workers’ wages. But, we work so hard every day and wages are small. We deserve more. Employers are making more money every year. Productivity is increasing, so workers must get more wage increase. Honestly, I think it is strange that we still have to strike to get what we want. This is because we don’t have a channel to express ourselves. Trade union in the plant is simply useless (10/6/2011, Dongguan No. 2).

Expectation of trade union reform: a pragmatist or idealist approach?

Workers' expectations about organizing increases during their experience of shared grievance and joint struggle (Koo, 2001; Silver, 2003; Soonok, 2003). In the light of this, workers in many authoritarian countries, such as South Korea (Koo, 2001; Soonok, 2003), and in formerly communist states, such as Poland (Laba, 1991), rose up to replace the state-affiliated official trade unions with independent trade unionism.

In the Chinese context, labour resistance increases worker pressure over the ACFTU system. Researchers noticed that worker dissatisfaction towards the ACFTU system was high, with workers dismissing union-initiated reforms simply as window-dressing; however, workers also believed that trade unionism was necessary and had the potential to represent their rights and interests if the ACFTU system was reformed (Nichols and Zhao, 2010; Pringle, 2011). A case study on wildcat strikes in China's Guangdong Province showed that group consciousness did not evolve towards acting in solidarity, but rather that wildcat strikes served as a tool for workers to pursue their short-term interests, and that the spread of workplace-initiated mutual support networks among workers was underdeveloped since workers preferred materialist methods to idealist approaches, and were not decisive enough to structurally alter the labour relations configuration (Wang, 2013a). On that basis, rising labour resistance may not necessarily translate into independent trade unionism or workers abandoning the ACFTU system.

The expectation of the surveyed migrant workers towards the ACFTU system varied, as is shown in Table IV. While "defending labour rights" was singled out as the most urgent trade union reform among the surveyed workers between 2006 and 2013, the importance of "union's internal democracy" increased after 2011; in 2015, "union's internal democracy" replaced "defending labour rights" as the most popular choice, with 35.1 per cent of the workers regarding it as the most urgent reform of the ACFTU system. This trend revealed a changing attitude among workers towards the official trade unions, which transformed from worker expectation about the defensive role of unions to a demand for a more proactive role by the trade union. Nevertheless, many surveyed workers were inclined to ask for limited trade union reform, with the percentage of workers saying that the priority of union reform was to "strengthen the tie with the party-state" nearly tripling between 2008 and 2015. In 2015, "strengthening the tie with the party-state" was the second most popular choice, while in 2006 it was not among the three most popular choices. At the same time, reform towards "union independence" became less popular. Although it stood out as the second most popular choice between 2006 and 2011, it fell out of the list in 2013 and 2015.

Years	Valid sample	Choice 1	%	Choice 2	%	Choice 3	%
2006	388	Defending labour rights	38.4	Union independence	24.2	No reform will work	22.4
2008	402	Defending labour rights	45.0	Union independence	32.1	Strengthening the tie with the party-state	12.7
2011	395	Defending labour rights	40.3	Union independence	25.8	Strengthening the tie with the party-state	24.8
2013	433	Defending labour rights	34.4	Union's internal democracy	33.5	Strengthening the tie with the party-state	24.9
2015	461	Union's internal democracy	35.1	Strengthening the tie with the party-state	34.7	Defending labour rights	30.2

Table IV.
What should be the most urgent reform of Chinese trade unions? (2006-2015)

Experience of striking is critical in forming various different worker attitudes. Studies on Chinese labour relations found that workers were aware of the central role of the party-state in the current trade union system (Chan, 2010; Chang and Brown, 2013; Chen, 2010; Feng, 2010; Friedman, 2014; Gray and Jang, 2015; Hurst, 2009; Wang, 2015). However, unlike the conventional wisdom that the escalation of labour action leads to independent trade unionism and ultimately challenges the one-party state (Koo, 2001; Laba, 1991; Solinger, 2001; Soonok, 2003), Chinese workers come to different interpretations about their experiences of labour action. While some workers demand a fundamental change of state unionism in China, others want limited trade union reform. In the past decade, the CPC has paid great attention to labour unrest. Apart from the introduction of new labour legislation, the police force has been used increasingly to intervene in wildcat strikes and arrest activists (Wang, 2015). However, the deployment of police does not mean that the CPC rejects labour demands during a strike. Instead, the CPC tends to seek a quicker way to resolve labour disputes outside of judicial procedures by pushing employers to agree on some of the demands brought by strikers (Dong, 2012; Wang, 2013b). In this case, wildcat strikes can act as a quick way for workers to resolve their disputes.

As a result, some workers use wildcat strikes as leverage to drag the Chinese party-state into labour-capital disputes to achieve their demands more quickly, while others view state intervention as a threat to worker freedom. Different interpretations about the experience of striking create different attitudes among workers towards the ACFTU's reform. As shown in Table V, workers with experience of joining one or two wildcat strikes are more likely to vote for the independence of the Chinese trade union from the CPC, accounting for more than half of the workers who made this choice between 2006 and 2013, and nearly two-thirds of the workers agreeing on union independence were workers with the experience of joining one or two wildcat strikes in 2015. However, workers with no experience of striking, along with those having participated in more than two strikes, were cautious. Among those who had participated in more than two strikes, the percentage choosing union independence remained in decline over the research period. In 2015, there were only 12.1 per cent making this choice, two-thirds less than in 2006. Thus, workers with more experience of strikes were unlikely to push for a fundamental change of the ACFTU system, while those with some experience of strikes were inclined to be more aggressive.

Table VI illustrates that among the workers seeing "union's internal democracy" as the most urgent reform, more than 70 per cent were those with no experience of strikes and those with the experience of participating in more than two strikes. Meanwhile, workers who had participated in more than two strikes accounted for 15.4 per cent of the

Table V.
Comparison of
workers viewing the
most urgent union
reform in China as
"union independence"
(2006-2015)

Years	Workers participating in one or two strikes		Workers participating in more than two strikes		Workers not participating in strike		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
2006	58	58.6	38	38.3	3	3.1	99
2008	70	51.5	46	33.8	20	14.7	136
2011	62	59.0	27	25.7	16	15.3	105
2013	9	52.9	4	23.5	4	23.6	17
2015	43	74.1	7	12.1	8	13.8	58

workers making this choice in 2006, while the percentage increased to 39.0 per cent in 2015; at the same time, the workers with experience of joining one or two wildcat strikes, who chose this item, decreased by 3.4 per cent between 2011 and 2015.

Furthermore, among the workers who believed the most urgent union reform was to “strengthen the tie with the party-state”, more of these had participated in more than two strikes. Table VII shows that the percentage of such workers increased ten-fold between 2006 and 2015, when in 2006 only 7.7 per cent chose this item; however, in 2015 more than two-thirds of the workers making this choice were those who had experienced more strikes. Contrarily, the workers who had joined one or two strikes did not share this viewpoint, as less than 10 per cent were those with experience of joining one or two strikes. A 27-year-old worker who had participated in four strikes explained her reason of choosing “strengthen the tie with the party-state” as the most urgent union reform:

I started working at the age of 16. I am an “old” worker. [...] (My experience) says strike needs a strategy. That is how to deal with the state. Today, the state is afraid of worker action. So, once you (workers) go on strike, the state and its trade union must come and ask what you want. At that time, the state and police will get the trade union to talk with you. You can boldly tell the union what you want. The union must run back fast and pass your demands to the state. The state will then push the employer to settle with the workers or solve the dispute directly by itself. Either way, we, the workers, can get what we want faster. So, I am not afraid of seeing police or government officials during strikes. Their appearance means the state worries about the workers. So, that’s when the union comes as a transmitter. It’s more effective for the workers to get what we want through this kind of union than an independent union (22/8/2015, Huizhou No.1).

A 24-year-old female worker who had joined two strikes disagreed:

Strike is very common. As a worker, there is nothing to be afraid of. The most essential problem in this country is workers don’t have organization. That’s why I said union needed to be independent. In this way, workers can balance the power of the boss. Independent trade

Table VI.
Comparison of
workers viewing
the most urgent
union reform in
China as “union’s
internal democracy”
(2006-2015)

Years	Workers participating in one or two strikes		Workers participating in more than two strikes		Workers not participating in strike		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
2006	3	13.6	2	15.4	8	71	13
2008	3	13.6	3	13.6	7	72.8	13
2011	6	26.1	7	30.4	10	43.5	23
2013	39	26	56	37.3	55	36.3	150
2015	32	22.7	55	39.0	54	38.3	141

Table VII.
Comparison of
workers viewing the
most urgent union
reform in China as
“strengthening the
tie with the party-
state” (2006-2015)

Year	Workers participating in one or two strikes		Workers participating in more than two strikes		Workers not participating in strike		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
2006	1	7.7	1	7.7	11	84.6	13
2008	3	5.6	10	18.5	41	75.9	54
2011	9	8.9	40	39.6	52	51.5	101
2013	2	1.8	63	56.2	47	42	112
2015	8	5.7	109	77.9	23	16.4	140

union can also guarantee what workers have today don't get lost tomorrow. In other places like USA, their unions are independent from the state, government and employers. Now, our country is catching up with USA. But, workers' life standards are not. Strike is only a method. The most effective way is to let unions be independent (13/8/2015, Dongguan No. 2).

Among those – with the experience of joining more than two wildcat strikes – saying union should strengthen the tie with the party-state, the union's tie with the party-state acts as an instrument to achieve the workers' demands during the strikes. Table VIII presents the reasons that those workers went on strike. Workers striking for long-term demands like “wage increase” and “voice in the workplace”, for immediate demands like “unpaid wages” and for solidarity like “support my work colleagues” all preferred to use the state-affiliated trade unionism to drag the party-state into direct negotiation with the workers. A 28-year-old worker with the experience of participating in three strikes said:

Everyone knows our trade union is useless. It listens to the state and company boss. But, I still chose the trade union reform should strengthen the union's tie with the party-state, because the union may not care about workers in normal days, but it must do something about workers' demands when strike happens. Last year, we had a strike. The union appeared immediately. We told the union what we wanted. And, the union reported to the state and company boss. Finally, we got what we demanded. Why? Because the party-state and company boss do not feed a trade union for nothing. Union is our tool. If you use the tool properly, it can help you exert bigger pressures on others (20/8/2015, Huizhou No. 6).

Above all, it is experience of action that divides workers' attitudes towards trade union reform. On the one hand, an idealist viewpoint among workers was witnessed, as workers with some experience of resistance became more critical about the ACFTU system and preferred fundamental reform of the Chinese trade union. On the other hand, workers with more experience of resistance – that is, more experience of dealing with the Chinese party-state – had reservations about union independence and were inclined to use the union's role as a conduit so that worker demands during strikes could be achieved more efficiently. A pragmatist opinion was thus observed. Nevertheless, both groups sought for the most effective way to achieve labour rights and interests, with the pragmatists inclining to use the state-affiliated unions as an instrument for workers to achieve their interests and idealists calling for a total restructure of the current Chinese trade unionism. Contrary to the argument that migrant workers are materialist and lacking in long-term incentives to organize (Lee, 2007; Wang, 2013a), this paper shows that experience of wildcat strikes is a learning process for the workers. The emergence of both pragmatists and idealists reflects

Reason of strike	Frequency	%
Wage increase	72	32.3
Support my work colleagues	65	29.1
Improve work conditions	34	15.2
Voice at workplace	33	14.8
Get back unpaid wage	16	7.2
Others	3	1.4
Total	223	100

Table VIII.
Reasons of joining more than two strikes among this group of workers

Note: Reasons of strike of the workers participating in more than two strikes and regarding the most urgent union reform in China as “strengthening the tie with the party-state”

a more sophisticated strategy of workers to resist, and depicts a trajectory towards political maturity among workers. As put by a 25-year-old male worker:

Everybody knows the key is politics, or in another word, the role of the state. The question here (about union reform) is how the workers place the state, in order to get the most of what the workers want (13/7/2013, Shenzhen No. 19).

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and worker
attitudes

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Conclusion

Industrialization, globalization and domestic marketization in China heighten labour resistance, similar to the development in other industrialized countries. However, unlike the tendency in other authoritarian and former communist states where labour resistance has become a catalyst to escalate labour discontents into institutional change, the Chinese worker's resistance has a more sophisticated effect on worker attitudes towards organization.

Experience exerts a significant influence on the formation of labour solidarity, but the result is also heterogeneous compared to the development of the labour movement in other industrialized countries. Indeed, when experience of labour disputes translates into an increase in labour action in China, workers have different interpretations about their experiences of action, particularly of wildcat strikes. This difference derives from the different perspectives about the strength of the Chinese party-state, which accumulates more resources to maintain its rule than do other authoritarian and former communist states, due to its continuous economic growth over the last 35 years. Experience of dealing with the state divides workers into two groups in terms of their attitude towards trade union reform. From an idealist aspect, workers with some experience of labour resistance are more militant and eager to push for the formation of an independent labour movement outside of the CPC. However, from a pragmatist perspective, workers with more experience of resistance tend to be more reserved and want the union to enhance its conduit function in passing their demands to the party-state.

Despite the separation of these two viewpoints, both endeavour to find an effective approach to achieving labour rights and interests. Moreover, the pragmatist group simply views state-controlled unionism as a tool to leverage the state for achieving labour rights and interests more effectively, and does not expect to compromise labour action to deal with the state's agenda of quietening down resistance activities.

Therefore, this paper argues that the development of solidarity is incremental but also decisive. In the Chinese political economic context, the process is sophisticated due to the dynamics among the party-state, ACFTU system and workers. However, compared to the formation of the labour movement in other industrialized countries, such as the UK and the USA, the path to political maturity in Chinese workers has been much quicker, as seen in the development of labour consciousness over the last decade. The future evolution of the labour movement in China will therefore be a reflection of the interaction between the party-state and workers (Table IX).

Years	Mediation		Arbitration		Litigation		Wildcat strike		Unresolved	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
2006	4	1.0	21	5.1	214	52.1	29	7.1	143	34.8
2008	3	0.7	13	3.1	192	45.5	65	15.4	149	35.3
2011	8	2.0	63	15.5	204	50.1	83	20.4	49	12.0
2013	10	2.2	46	10.2	199	44.3	150	33.4	44	9.8
2015	11	2.3	57	11.9	163	34.2	227	47.6	19	4.0

Table IX.
How did workers
resolve their most
recent labour
dispute? (2006-2015)

Note

1. See Table IX for detailed information about Figure 1. The survey puts labour dispute mediation, arbitration and litigation together as the official labour dispute resolution channels, as the Chinese official labour dispute resolution system follows the “one mediation, one arbitration and two court rulings” procedure (Hwang and Wang, 2015).

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