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**Review of Huaiyin, L. (2023) The master in bondage:
factory workers in China, 1949-2019**

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Citation

Cao, M. (2024). Review of Huaiyin, L. (2023) The master in bondage:
factory workers in China, 1949-2019. *European Journal Of East
Asian Studies*, 23(1), 109-111. doi:10.1163/15700615-02301002

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4211925>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version
(if applicable).

Book Reviews



Huaiyin Li, *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019*, 2023.
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. vii + 330pp., \$71.25 (hardcover) ISBN:
9781503634541; \$25 (paperback) ISBN: 9781503635289.

Huaiyin Li's *The Master in Bondage* offers a nuanced exploration of power dynamics within Chinese factories spanning from 1949 to 2019. Through a micro-historical lens, this work stands out for its extensive use of oral history materials. It draws from interviews with 97 retirees from various state-owned enterprises across China. These interviews capture a spectrum of experiences, ranging from the everyday concerns of ordinary workers to the roles of factory managers and even 'rebels' during the Cultural Revolution. The diversity of voices not only unveils the intricacies inside the socialist factories, but also elucidates how the Maoist state achieved rapid industrialisation within an agrarian society by employing a set of labour management mechanisms. Throughout the book, Li maintains a balanced approach, analysing source materials by juxtaposing narratives from witnesses with different experiences of the same institutions, events, or practices.

The book delves into the everyday experiences of socialist workers during the Maoist era, organising its thematic analysis into four chapters which explore the themes of disciplining workers through identity building, worker participation in factory governance, everyday power relations in state firms, and work performance in everyday production. Li argues that, unlike the material incentives prevalent in free-market economies or the coercive methods employed in the Soviet Union, the Maoist state relied heavily on what he terms the 'introspective approach' to motivate its labor force on the workshop floor (pp. 60–61). This approach involved organising educational sessions aimed at strengthening workers' identification with the factory community and fostering conformity to the party-state (p. 59). Although the concept of 'democratic management' within Maoist factories remained largely aspirational and unrealised, institutions such as trade unions and the Staff and

Workers' Representative Congress (swc) played tangible roles in safeguarding and advocating for the economic interests of factory workers (pp. 75, 81). For example, workers used swc as the channel to express their concerns about income and living conditions. However, the 'masters' of socialist China were unable to participate in decision-making in their factories, as the Maoist state had once claimed. As Li contends, these formal institutions were part of the 'substantive governance' that emphasised ensuring 'workers' satisfactory performance in production and the smooth operation of state firms instead of prioritizing the unrealistic and impractical objectives of formalist ideologies' (p. 100).

The relationship between cadres and workers in the state firms was nothing close to the romanticised Maoist ideology. While cadres held considerable sway in matters such as selection of model workers, the reliance of state firm workers on their arbitrary rulings was mitigated by certain factors (p. 124). Notably, the state provided a guarantee of lifetime employment within state-owned factories, thereby imbuing workers with a degree of security (p. 129). The cadres also relied on workers' cooperation to achieve production targets, fostering an equilibrium between the power of cadres and the power of workers (p. 131). Contrary to the prevailing neoliberal narrative that portrays Maoist state firms as inherently inefficient, Li contends that deliberate underperformance, or 'shirking', was not a rational choice for most workers (p. 163). Instead, the rational choice for the workers was to 'perform one's routine duties in a manner that met the norms of the workplace' (p. 164). Both formal and informal institutions played crucial roles in facilitating the achievement of production goals within state-owned factories.

After offering a multifaceted picture of labour relations in Maoist China, the book investigates it during two important periods, namely the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the long Reform and Opening era (1978–2019). Over these five decades, Chinese factory workers experienced profound shifts in their livelihoods. Social tensions inside the factories were high before the Cultural Revolution, and they provided a breeding ground for activism and violence in the upcoming years of upheaval. For example, these tensions manifested among various groups of workers, with informal workers often feeling marginalised and rank-and-file employees expressing discontent with cadres' corruption and favoritism (p. 168). Mao's last years marked a return to order on the workshop floor, yet the equilibrium in labour management, maintained by a combination of formal and informal institutions, teetered on the brink (p. 203). In the book's perspective, it was the series of reforms in the 1980s and 1990s that ultimately dismantled this equilibrium within Maoist factories. Key reforms included the introduction of the contracted responsibility system

in 1986 and the transition to a modern corporate system in 1995 (p. 213). The former incentivised factory management to exploit workers in pursuit of short-term profits, while the latter paved the way for worker layoffs. Li suggests that workers nationwide experienced a decline in income and social status after the decades of reforms (p. 223). The 'masters' escaped from their bondage, but at the same time, they lost their job security. Beneath the surface, the motive of the state was to control the deficit from 'owning' the state firms.

In pursuit of constructing a 'thick description', the book proposes that both formal and informal institutions on the workshop floor served to discipline the labour force, given the state's financial constraints in using material incentives to mobilise factory workers. This strategy proved to be both effective and efficient for the Maoist state. Beyond the many insightful and engaging personal narratives featured in this book, one may also be intrigued by further inquiries into the lives of Chinese workers during the Maoist era: what constituted the typical experience for those employed in collective firms? How did factory workers navigate daily life outside of their workplace? To what extent were the material and non-material livelihoods of factory workers influenced by global factors? Additionally, what roles did transnational scientific and economic collaborations, particularly with the US and Western Europe, play in shaping the landscape of Chinese factories prior to the Reform and Opening? These questions await further examination.

The Master in the Bondage not only offers refreshing observations on the everyday labour relations in Maoist China, but also supplies a story from the recent past that encourages us rethink our contemporary world. Labour relations are globally undergoing dramatic transformation with the rise of digital technology and artificial intelligence, and Li's timely reassessment of the experiences of Chinese factory workers can shed light on the aforementioned challenges. As such, it is a must-read for those interested in contemporary labour, social, and economic history.

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