

(SOEs and private firms alike) are emerging as competitive players by any global benchmarks. These firms are all-too-often dismissed as lumbering giants that will never really compete with the best capitalist firms of the world. The current crisis in the US capitalist system should make us all question that assumption, and Nolan is again right on the mark here. Chapters five and six deal with analyses of real crises (the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and environmental deterioration in China), nicely balancing out the confident assessment of the earlier chapters. Chapter seven is an excellent discussion of global capitalism, and here Nolan seems almost prophetic, as he articulates the threat of the financial crisis that is currently brewing: “[t]he world faces the possibility of a catastrophic financial crisis stemming from the operation of the capitalist free market in the realm of finance” (p. 214). He then goes on in his straightforward succinct style to analyse a laundry list of issues that shape the global financial system. The final chapter is devoted to the topic of US–China relations. Again, Nolan hits the key points that are often lost in the debate over engagement versus confrontation. He argues here that China’s integration into the global political economy has meant that the US and China are much more interdependent than most assessments of the China “threat” understand. However, he is also careful to point out that notions of the Chinese “threat” are as much manufactured by the American military industrial complex, which needs enemies in order to survive.

I find myself agreeing with virtually every point that Nolan takes on in this outstanding volume. That alone suggests to me that many will not agree with some of Nolan’s positions (particularly his critical appraisal of the US). But regardless of the level of agreement, this is a book that should be read by all.

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*Some Assembly Required: Work, Community, and Politics in China’s Rural Enterprises*

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Village and township enterprises (TVEs) have played a large role in China’s market-driven economic growth over the past 30 years. Their economic production has made China into the world’s factory, they contribute a large share of national GNP, and employ a fifth of the domestic labour force. However, TVEs in Chen’s study are viewed not only as industrial organizations that produce commodities, but as communities of social interaction within the context of increasingly complex labour divisions and growing inequalities. The main argument is that economically prosperous TVEs create new patterns of authority relations. In other words, the success of a TVE depends not only on being able to turn a profit but also on creating new forms of trust and co-operation that enable workers and managers to interact in ways that enhance production rather than generate conflict.

The study uses a historical institutional perspective to trace the development of two rags-to-riches TVEs in Zhejiang province’s Wenzhou and Jinhua regions. Founded respectively by a former shoeshine boy and a former farmer, both firms developed over three decades into large multi-divisional enterprises, with thousands of employees producing world-class electrical, automotive and other products. This development has been constituted by tension between, on the one hand, community

norms of kinship and egalitarianism rooted in the Chinese village and Communist legacies and, on the other hand, rationalizing pressures on work through mechanization and globalization. The data stem from ethnographic interviewing and limited participant observation in the firms over nine months in 1997–1998, with follow-up research in 2004. The analysis shows how managers identified resources and devised policies to bolster their authority to co-ordinate the rapidly growing number of employees.

The evolution of the enterprises is analytically divided into three stages. The first stage is “survival” stretching from the final year of the Cultural Revolution into the 1980s: leaders used kinship and Communist legacies of egalitarianism to mobilize employees and managers to overcome a lack of resources. The second stage is “expansion” during the 1990s, characterized by a growing division of labour, rationalized assembly-line production, infusion of non-local professionals, and new inequalities and tensions between managers and workers. In the third stage of “reintegration,” from the late 1990s, the firms’ leaders introduced new policies to recreate kinship as in a “corporation-as-family” ideology, thereby reviving kinship within a business model. Also, despite the emphasis of the two firms on professional training and degrees, the leadership of the two firms still remains firmly in the hands of the locals who lack such forms of capital.

A particularly intriguing aspect of this development is the relationship with the local state. During their development, the two TVEs received neither financial support nor direction from the local state, a reflection of the overall poverty of the Wenzhou and Jinhua regions, and noticeably different from the entrepreneurial role of local state cadres that has been documented for TVEs elsewhere. From the beginning, the leaders of the two firms strove to maintain autonomy from the local state administrative officials, even as they sought commercial relations with state enterprises. Yet, in a fascinating twist, the leaders in the 2000s invited the local Communist Party to set up branches inside their firms to deal with labour problems. Now the Party and its related organs, such as the All-China Women’s Federation, are elements of the firms’ labour relations, but are clearly under the direction of the firms’ management. From their side, Party members are grateful because this arrangement gives them something to do. Therefore, the “reintegration” stage of firm development also consists of close ties with the Party.

One less-explored aspect of the study is differences between the two firms’ corporate cultures and development timelines. In keeping with the study’s historical institutional perspective, this reflects the different contexts of their founding. One firm began as a brigade and commune enterprise in the last year of the Cultural Revolution while the other started as a private enterprise in the early 1980s. These differences appear relevant to the author’s original hypothesis regarding property rights – which informed the original selection of the two cases for study – but which was superseded by insights from field research.

In sum, *Some Assembly Required* is a finely crafted analysis of how Fordist production techniques and integration into global capitalism meshes with both the kinship solidarity of Chinese villages and political control of the Party. It makes a significant contribution to debates on TVEs and local state–society relations in China studies, as well as to understandings of institutional transformation in post-Communist orders, and to labour relations in rural industrialization. The theoretical framework is both sophisticated yet accessible even to advanced undergraduate students.

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