

Book Reviews

Walmart in China

Edited by ANITA CHAN

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011

304 pp. \$24.95

ISBN 978-0-8014-7731-7 doi:10.1017/S0305741012001300

Walmart in China is that rare bird: a multi-authored volume that benefits from the breadth of its contributors' approaches while still maintaining a tight focus and producing a coherent analysis. Walmart may be a case unto itself – indeed, the book's title and content implicitly suggest as much. And to their credit, the authors do not try to generalize beyond the case of the gigantic retailer. Yet they also point out, quite rightly, that Walmart is such a big player, especially in global labour practices and supply chains, that what it does in China has profound implications for the wider industrial and commercial economy of the country and, indeed, the world.

Anita Chan begins with a most helpful chapter that introduces “Walmartization” – a useful if less than euphonious concept that underscores the specificity of the case at hand. It has three interrelated meanings: the devastating effects of big box stores on local communities; Walmart's low-wage, anti-union labour policy (what might be called “Always Low Pay”); and its capacity to dominate its suppliers. *Walmart in China* focuses on the latter two, but also on more than that.

An opening section on Walmart's supply chain begins with a fascinating piece by Nelson Lichtenstein on the company's historical and cultural roots in the American south – especially its popular religiosity and abstemiousness. We learn about the personality cult of Chairman Sam and his early commitment to “buy American,” which he dumped once it became too expensive. Xue Hong analyses Walmart's overweening control of its suppliers, who get profit margins as low as one-fifth of what they can make selling to Japanese companies. Yu Xiaomin and Pun Ngai cover Walmart's “corporate social responsibility,” arguing that monitoring is much more effective in promoting a profitable consultancy industry than stopping sweatshops. Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu make a compelling argument that workers benefit far more from time rates than the piece rates favoured by Walmart suppliers.

A second section on “The Walmart Stores” hones in on the labour process and workers' and managers' experiences thereof, based on interviews, workers' own narratives, and participant observation. David Davies examines Walmart's corporate culture, including the cult of Sam Walton and the strong affinities between the Party's expectations for its cadres and Walmart's for its “corporate cadres” and employees. For instance Walmart wants ideological control, not just labour discipline. The subsequent chapters in this section show how Walmart gets what it wants. Davies and Taylor Seeman weave their interviews with a former store manager into a fascinating first-person account. We learn about his relationships with local officials, who demanded all manner of special treatment that he was unable to provide under Walmart's strict corporate code. He expresses frustration at having been “brainwashed” by Walmart's promises of a corporate ladder he could try to climb, and uses the same term to describe how the company gets a great deal of unpaid labour from its workers. Scott E. Myers and Anita Chan present the diary of a shop-floor supervisor that captures the contradictions of Walmart's hegemony over its employees: “democratic yet authoritarian, egalitarian yet hierarchical, voluntaristic

yet coercive, creative yet stifling” (p. 154). His “rebellion” first took the form of minor infractions that were “always oriented toward the fulfilment of corporate objectives” (p. 155). After years of trying, though, he couldn’t endure working for Walmart any longer, and left while still retaining significant feelings of loyalty. Finally, Eileen M. Otis presents the story of her research assistant who took a job as a cashier and experienced the full brunt of Walmart’s “techno-despotism.”

A third section focuses on the curious unionization of Walmart in China. As Anita Chan documents once again, this “unionization” was a state-dominated affair that ultimately produced a form of organization that Walmart could control and with which it still lives happily ever after. Jonathan Unger, Diana Beaumont and Anita Chan show that “unionization” has improved neither wages nor working conditions. Finally, Katie Quan bemoans the unsurprising lack of popular mobilization against Walmart in China compared with the US.

What emerges from *Walmart in China* is a dystopian *aufhebung* of capitalism and state socialism. Like state socialism, Walmart is a monopsonist that produces serious economic distortions. It demands souls, not just obedience, and it deploys armies of cadres to achieve as much. Its core values feature abstinence and clean living. It legitimates itself as operating in the interests of the working class. It represents itself as the revolutionary creation of a venerated supreme leader. Yet like capitalism, it presses up against and, indeed, beyond the limits of its workers’ physical endurance. It fills all available space, and ruthlessly attacks its competition in pursuit of total domination. It spans the globe. It cannot be controlled. This may not be the transcendence that Hegel or Marx envisioned. But luckily, history isn’t yet done with us, or we with it.

MARC BLECHER
marc.blecher@oberlin.edu

China’s Crisis Management

Edited by JAE HO CHUNG

London and New York: Routledge, 2012

xiv + 151 pp. £85.00; \$140.00

ISBN 978-0-415-67780-6 doi:10.1017/S0305741012001312

“China is a nation of risks,” Richard P. Suttmeier states at the start of his contribution to this edited collection: “Serious floods, deadly landslides, chemical spills, industrial accidents, drought and catastrophic earthquakes all point to China’s vulnerability to natural and human created hazards” (p.108). This is nothing new. In the next chapter, on the theme of natural disasters, Gang Chen points to a history of many centuries during which governments of former dynasties lived or died by the ability to respond to immense crises. The challenge has grown even greater since 1978, as rapid industrialization has placed enormous burdens on China’s natural environment.

There are two themes that weave their way through each of the contributions to this short book. One is the bureaucratic structures dealing with different kinds of crises, and how fit, or unfit, these might be. Crises like the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic of 2003, as Hongyi Lai shows, highlight major problems in how provinces and the central government along with interlinking agencies try to deal with catastrophes. At that time, officials had very little guidance on how to deal with the disease within the legal framework provided to them (it wasn’t even classified