

**Between the State and Labour: The Conflict of Chinese Trade Unions'
Double Identity in Market Reform**

Chen Feng, *China Quarterly* No. 176, 2003

(This article was awarded the 2003 Gordon White Annual Prize by the influential academic magazine *The China Quarterly*, published by the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies)

Excerpt: When faced with increasingly strained labour relations, what role will China's trade unions play? Will they represent and protect workers' interests? To address these issues in the current situation we need to focus our attention more on relations between the state and the unions rather than on trade unions' relations with management. This article raises the following questions: since trade unions in China have a double identity as both a state organization and a workers' one, how can they fulfill their role as workers' representatives and what factors will prompt them to do so? In other words, to what extent can China's trade unions reflect their "social" rather than "state" aspects and how can they act like real trade unions, as opposed to government departments. Can they play both roles simultaneously while maintaining a balance between them? According to the author, the role trade unions play in concrete labour disputes depends on whether there are conflicts between their double identity and the scale of the conflicts, and he suggests three possibilities: 1) If there is no conflict between the practical role of the union and that allowed by the system, the two roles are compatible. In this type of situation trade unions have more freedom to defend workers' interests. Unions that defend workers' interests within the legal framework fall into this category. 2) Alternatively if there is a conflict between the two institutional roles that obliges the union to take the side of the state, its role as workers' representative will be affected. However, this does not rule out the possibility that some unions will continue to exert their double roles and mediate between government and workers to protect some of the latter's interests. This will mainly occur when workers take spontaneous collective action. 3) In the third case, unions are obliged to fulfil their state role. For instance, if workers demand to set up their own organizations, the union will unhesitatingly take the side of the state. Consequently, the trade union's response to labour disputes and protests may be summarized as follows: representation, mediation and blockage. The article first analyses the institutional reasons why conflicts between the trade unions' double identity exists. Then it examines the three situations mentioned above (legal disputes, collective actions and independent organisations), looks at how conflicts occur and why there are three different forms of reaction. Lastly, the article discusses the influence this conflict in the unions' double identity may have on China's labour policies.

End

Chen Feng, *China Quarterly* No. 176, 2003



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/fr/deed.fr>