

Lasting socialist cultural tradition
-----A case study of collective action by SOE workers
Tong Xin
Sociological Research No. 1, 2006

Abstract: The reform of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is undoubtedly an important part of China's economic reforms. The restructuring of SOEs is carried out by means of bankruptcy, liquidation, the selling and acquisition of enterprises, and shareholding changes. The reform has not only pushed a large number of small and medium SOEs onto the free market, but has also led to layoffs of many workers in these enterprises. Is there a collective resistance of workers to large-scale layoffs? And if so, how do workers become mobilised in their collective action? What culture and concept do they use in doing so? This article analyses workers' collective action framing by examining one case of anti-takeover action that occurred at "enterprise Z". Workers' negative experiences in the market economy have highlighted their identification with traditional socialist culture. The privatising nature of the reforms that entail mergers and acquisitions has aroused a sense of 'ownership' in workers. It has also intensified their attachment to the collective recognition of a 'community' and a 'common home'. Workers realized that the protection provided by traditional SOEs was gone. They had become very attached to it and its life-long security, but they found they could use the culture and tradition of the pre-reform era to seek legitimacy and ways of defending their collective interests. The lasting traditional socialist culture may change the path of China's market development. The author has observed a number of factors from the workers' action in "enterprise Z". First compared to the mainstream free-market ideology, former SOE workers show more flexibility in framing their lives, behaviour and collective action. They are more easily influenced by concrete situations and make better use of their experiences and cultural tradition to make choices concerning their actions. Second, SOE workers differ from those in other types of enterprises in their collective action framing. Their working experiences and traditional socialist culture from the planned economy era give them a strong sense of solidarity. This is not demonstrated by a mere repetition of socialist ideas; it is common memory and cultural heritage of the workers who had lived through that period. Third, through collective action traditional socialist culture continues to exert influence on the scope of SOE reforms and the way they are carried out. The organisation mechanism of trade unions and unions of workers' representatives provide useful organisational resources for worker's collective actions.

[End]

Tong Xin , *Sociological Research*, No. 1, 2006



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