



# **The Circular State - The Symbolic Labor Politics in Transitional China**



*Written by*  
**Xiuying Cheng**

**Horizon Research Publishing, USA**

# **The Circular State – The Symbolic Labor Politics in Transitional China**

**Written by**

**Xiuying Cheng**

**Assistant Professor, Renmin University of China**

**Ph.D. University of California-Berkeley**

**Horizon Research Publishing, USA**

**Title:** The Circular State – The Symbolic Labor Politics in Transitional China

**Author:** Xiuying Cheng

**Edition:** The First Edition

**Published by:**

Horizon Research Publishing

2880 ZANKER RD STE 203

SAN JOSE, CA 95134

USA

<http://www.hrpub.org>

Printed on acid-free paper

**ISBN:** 978-1-943484-12-6

**Price:** \$43.00 USA per copy

**General Enquiries**

Publish with HRPUB, learn about our policies, submission guidelines etc.

Email: [book@hrpub.org](mailto:book@hrpub.org)

**Notice**

This book contains information obtained from authentic and highly regarded sources. Reprinted material is quoted with permission, and sources are indicated. A wide variety of references are listed. Reasonable efforts have been made to publish reliable data and information, but the author and the publisher cannot assume responsibility for the validity of all materials or for the consequences of their use.

**Trademark**

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

**Copyright © 2017 Horizon Research Publishing Co., LTD**

This work is subject to copyright. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the author, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

## **Abstract**

The restructuring of SOEs (State Owned Enterprises) in China produced a great deal of labor contentions. How to manage the workers and control the labor conflicts after the collapsing of the work unit system became a big challenge to the state's stability and legitimacy during the transition to the market economy. This book attempts to explore the structure and functioning of this state in transition from the particular perspective of the interaction between the state and its workers.

Based on the ethnographical research in central China, it offered a comparative case study of two groups of workers (the state workers vs. the temporary workers), especially the concrete processes of their struggles, including street protests, office petitions and court litigations. The radical protesters on the streets would be directed into the petition offices, which would further refer or push the workers to the courts to seek clear judgement. When the conflict could not reach a conclusion at the local level, the workers would petition to the central government, which would certainly refer them back to the local.

The process of the workers' struggles displayed a circular state composing of four intersecting circles: the circle between petition offices, the circle between courts, the circle between petition offices and courts, and the circle between the center and the local. This circular state only circulated the cases of labor conflicts, instead of resolving them, but it turned the material requests from the workers into discursive struggles about justifications, and thus transformed the radical confrontation between the labor and the capital into peaceful communications.

This containment of labor conflicts was not an oppressive process simply to quench down the workers' resistance, but instead a productive process to promote the statist capitals, such as the state policies and state laws, and produce the imagination of the state. During the active engagement with the state agents, the challenging workers gradually learned to use the dominant and official languages to frame their requests, interpret their positions and realign their relations to the state. This symbolic domination was the crucial mechanism for the state to manage and control the contentious workers during the period of transition.



## Abstract

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	I
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1. Introduction.....	2
1.2. Literature Review.....	3
1.2.1. The Workers’ Responses to Labor Conflicts .....	3
1.2.2. The State’s Structure and Function in Labor Control .....	5
1.2.3. Bourdieu: The State as a Bureaucratic Field and its Function of Symbolic Domination .....	7
1.3. Research Design and Field Work.....	10
1.4. What is the Circular State?.....	14
1.4.1. The Structure of the Circular State.....	14
1.4.2. Functioning of the Circular State – Dispersive Containment.....	18
1.4.3. The Nature of “Dispersive Containment” – Symbolic Domination .....	23
1.5. Organization of This Book.....	24
<b>Chapter 2. History and Transition: Relation between     the State, the SOEs and the Workers</b> .....	25
2.1. The Workers’ State: Work Unit Period.....	26
2.2. Retreatment of the State – Reform and Restructuring of the SOEs .....	30
2.3. Reinforcement of the State .....	35
2.4. Lost in Transition .....	40
<b>Chapter 3. The Castle: The Pension Disputes of the State Workers</b> .....	43
3.1. The Ten-year War: From Radical Resistance to Peaceful Articulation .....	47
3.1.1. Stage One: Radical Conflict and Mild Official Intervention (1998-2000) .....	48
3.1.2. Stage Two: Legal Struggle and Radical Revenge (2000-2003) .....	50
3.1.3. Stage Three: Back to the Official Petitions (2004-2008) .....	52
3.2. The Circular State: Circulation of the “Case” .....	55

3.2.1. Circle between Petition Offices – When History Met the Future .....	58
3.2.2. Circle between Courts – The Political Logic under the Legal Judgment .....	64
3.2.3. Circle between Petition Offices and Courts – Courts as an Exit.....	71
3.2.4. Circle between the Local and the Center – Pilgrimage to the Center.....	73
3.3. Symbolic Domination: From Political Crusader to Economic Calculator to Legal Defender.....	77
3.4. Conclusion.....	81
<b>Chapter 4. The Trial: The Social Security</b>	
<b>Disputes of Temporary Workers .....</b>	<b>83</b>
4.1. Introduction: The Five Year Struggle .....	86
4.2. The Circle of Petition Offices – When Future Met History .....	86
4.3. The Circle of Courts – The Legal Appearance to the Political Struggles .....	97
4.3.1. Administrative Litigation: A Formal Success .....	97
4.3.2. Civil Litigation – Loss Based on Form .....	101
4.3.3. Circle between Petition Offices and Courts: Petition Offices as Entrance.....	105
4.3.4. Circle between the Local and the Center: The Pressure to the Local.....	107
4.3.5. Change of Subjectivity – From the Outsider of the State towards the Loyal Citizen .....	109
<b>Chapter 5. Three Avenues to the State:</b>	
<b>Streets, Courts and Petition Offices.....</b>	<b>117</b>
5.1. Street Protests – Rule of Force .....	118
5.2. Petition – “Rule of Man” with Reference to “Rule of Law” .....	120
5.3. Legal System – “Rule of Law” Intervened by “Rule of Man” .....	127
5.4. Protest, Petition and Litigation.....	132
<b>Chapter 6. The Effects and Functioning of the Circular State .....</b>	<b>135</b>
6.1. The Promotion of Statist Capital .....	136
6.2. Imagination and Mystification of the State .....	139

6.3. Symbolic Domination of the Workers.....	142
6.4. Dispersive Containment of the Labor Disputes by the Circular State.....	147
<b>Chapter 7. Conclusion: Bourdieu and the Chinese State in Transition .....</b>	<b>153</b>
7.1. The State as Intersecting Fields.....	154
7.2. The Classification Struggles.....	155
7.3. Time was Important .....	156
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>About the Author .....</b>	<b>165</b>

## Contents

## Overview of the Book

The restructuring of SOEs (State Owned Enterprises) in China produced a great deal of labor contentions. How to manage the workers and control the labor conflicts after the collapsing of the work unit system became a big challenge to the state's stability and legitimacy during the transition to the market economy. This book attempts to explore the structure and functioning of this state in transition from                      ar perspective of the interaction between the state and its workers.



ISBN 978-1-943484-12-6



9 781943 484126

\$43.00 USA

[www.hrpub.org](http://www.hrpub.org)