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The Irony of the Cranes: Labour Issues in the Construction Industry in the New China

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The Irony of the Cranes: Labour Issues in the Construction Industry in the New China

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ABSTRACT

The crane has been an ancient symbol of longevity in China carrying with it intimation of distinctive principles of ancient China; harmony, patience and graceful coexistence with nature. It is ironic that the construction crane is the new symbol of a changing land, where old *hutong* neighborhoods are disappearing as fast as the bird and its habitat. Is this new crane helping to create a harmonious society, as the Hu-Wen administration would have you believe? The economic boom fueled in large part by the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games brings with it many new construction jobs, labour issues and in some cases new forms of corruption. Does this development reinforce solidarity and good working conditions in a country where unions are largely controlled by the government? Or do business networks, *guanxi*, continue to dominate business relationships and hamper the achievement of good working conditions? These questions will be examined, including issues such as corruption, safety and working conditions. Comparisons to labour issues in the United States will be included.

Keywords: *Labour, China, Olympics, construction, crane*

Introduction

The crane has long been an ancient symbol of longevity in China. Bronze cranes grace the entrance of many of the buildings around the Forbidden City and in other historic sites in Beijing and the crane and other animal symbols are prominent in Chinese art dating back hundreds of years.¹ Construction of the Forbidden City started during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). During this period, China was under the control of the foreign invading Mongols who let the arts flourish and continue to evolve, producing some of the most famous literati landscape painters in Chinese history. One such artist, Chen Ruan, in his painting, *Mountains of the Immortals* makes reference to the crane as a symbol of immortality as one of these immortals rides on a crane in the mountains near a Taoist temple (Art Institute of Chicago).

The crane also symbolizes harmony with nature, an agrarian society where the majority of the people were farmers who lived in small villages. Today these birds are facing an uphill battle in their own quest for survival in the new China. The White-naped Cranes for example breed in northeastern Mongolia, northeastern China and adjacent areas of southeastern Russia. Birds migrate south through China, resting at areas along the Yellow River delta, wintering at wetlands in the middle Yangtze River valley. Destruction of wetlands due to agricultural expansion poses the most significant threat to these birds. Critical habitat is also threatened by a proposed series of dams in the Amur River basin and the Three Gorges Dam in China (Meine & Archibald 1996).

It is ironic that another crane wrought from steel is now a symbol of a shifting land, where old *hutong* neighborhoods are disappearing as fast as the bird and its habitat. Is this new crane helping to create a harmonious society, as the Hu-Wen administration would have you believe? In Beijing, you do not see birds flying by;

you see construction cranes off in the distance, their silhouettes punctuating the horizon. This building craze is transforming cities into a futuristic mix of old and the ultra new, where hutong neighborhoods wait in the shadows of hotels and shopping malls for the wrecking ball of the mighty cranes. The speed of construction in the new China is so fast, that about the only thing that's a constant is change.

The economic boom in Beijing is fueled in large part by the 2008 Summer Olympics, bringing with it many new construction jobs, labour issues and in some cases new forms of corruption. Nevertheless, anyone familiar with China knows that growth overall is not a recent development. In the early 1980's, Deng Xiaoping declared a number of regions special economic zones (SEZ), giving these largely rural areas special incentives, including relaxed environmental rules, availability of cheap land and cheap labour. One region in particular, Shenzhen, once sleepy fishing village, has grown at an annual rate of 28 percent (French 2006). And in Shanghai, the presence of construction cranes marked a massive boom of new construction where more than 5000 new buildings over 15 stories high were built by 2004 (Fishman 2006). Construction labour in Beijing in preparation for the 2008 Summer Games is a salient example of these trends in China's evolution.

Harmonious Society

How is harmony created in the new China? Are the urban planners and architects of today creating a harmonious society with their new urban designs? Or do the millions of migrant workers, many of them day labourers working in the construction industry work in solidarity with the largest labour organisation in the world, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to create this

harmonious society? Harmony does not always mean solidarity in today's China, but labour and the solidarity of the working people do have the opportunity to play a large role in creating this more harmonious society.

This phrase has been on the minds of the relatively new administration and can often be seen in translated media clips. On a recent trip to Africa, visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao said, "We aim to build a harmonious society at home, and work with other countries to build a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity (China Daily 2007)." Elizabeth Economy, author of *A River Runs Black*, details the philosophical underpinnings of just what a harmonious society might mean. In Confucianism for example, nature occupied its own space in its filial ordering. Nature possessed a godlike ability to wreak havoc or bring bounty as punishment or reward for humans' behaviour (Economy 2004).

The buildup to the Olympic Games has not only fueled a construction boom but has renewed a sense of nationalistic pride, giving the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) a chance to continue the slow but steady changes necessary to satisfy the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It has also given them a chance to divert attention away from some of the social and cultural issues like the plight of migrant workers and human rights violations that continue to rear their ugly heads. This renewed nationalism brings with it worries of its own, especially as the Olympic Games approach, as evidenced by the Chinese fans that heckled and booed the Japanese team and the Japanese national anthem during the final match of the Asia cup in 2004, which the Chinese team lost 3-1. The continued growth of the economy gave the CCP administration the confidence it needs to play a larger role in the Asia-Pacific politics as they took the leading role in the successful six party talks.

Can this construction and economic boom permit a harmonious society to exist or is it creating a bigger gap between the haves and the have nots. According to Nicholas R. Lardy, senior fellow of the Institute for International Economics and author of *China in the World Economy*, "China's economy is now three times that of India, and the gap is growing. Two important dimensions of this growth are the emergence of a large middle class and a rising income gap (Lardy 2006). Or do business networks, *guanxi*, continue to dominate business relationships and hamper the achievement of good working conditions. Personal relationships, or *guanxi*, its network and impact it has in China is legendary.

Labour Unions in China

Figures on construction labour unions are not readily available, unlike the bigger news stories of the Wal-Mart concessions to the ACFTU for example. Many construction labourers are migrant workers – whether or not they are even required to join the "union" to begin working on a construction site is not clear. It brings to mind questions such as work certifications, apprenticeship programs, and the like. Do the employers require certifications and minimum hours of training before allowing workers to say operate a tower crane for example? What issues affecting unions in the United States are similar to those influencing the construction workers and millions of migrant workers that make up a large percentage of the construction labour in China? National statistics on the number of migrants vary from as low as 90 million to as high as 300 million. Compare that number to the 223 million that make up the European Union's workforce and you can begin to see the enormity of China's migrant workforce alone (Fishman 2006).

Does this economic development reinforce solidarity and good working conditions in a country where unions are largely controlled by the government? In a country with one “union,” the ACTFU, do the workers share the same collective bargaining rights of union labour around the world? For example, does this union help its members organise a strike against an employer who has not paid its workers for three months? Are migrant workers required to join the union in order to gain the benefits of union membership, perhaps to gain better health care benefits?

As stated in the constitution of the AFTCU:

The ACTFU is a mass organization of the working class formed voluntarily by the Chinese workers and staff members. Founded on May 1, 1925, it now has membership of 134 million in more than 1.713 million primary trade union organizations. Now under the leadership of ACFTU, there are 31 federations of trade unions of provinces, autonomous region and municipalities directly under the Central Government and 10 national industrial unions (aftcu.org 2007)

The ACFTU constitution goes on to state how it has established “relations with more than 400 national trade union centres of over 130 countries.” In July 2001, when Beijing won the rights to host the 2008 Olympic Games, these relations that the ACFTU had fostered would now be able to put more pressure on them to continue to strengthen the rights of their workers. They had been pressuring the likes of Wal-Mart and other largely American corporations to “unionize” their work forces who were in clear violation of the law “that any enterprise with more than twenty-five workers was required to establish a union (Ross 2006).” In October 2006 Wal-Mart in fact conceded and allowed the ACFTU to organise unions in all of its operations in China.

One might think that this large win for the ACFTU would cause ripples in America and begin to break the strong anti-union stance that Wal-Mart continues to uphold, but the news has come and gone quickly, much to the grin of Wal-Mart executive in America I am sure. The fact that it has not garnered more news in the United States brings to light what impact the unionizing of China Wal-Mart has; not much at all. Because of their roots in a socialist economy, where workers' interests were not, in principle, at odds with those of employers, China's trade unions have mostly functioned in a social capacity, to organize picnics or film screenings or take a pastoral interest in worker's domestic welfare (Ross 2006).²

Labour Unions in the United States

How does construction labour in the new China compare with that of the largest construction union in the United States? In the United States, collective bargaining still gives union members and their employers the rights to earn a living wage, to maintain good health care and earn a pension, unlike their union brothers and sisters in China. Working for the largest construction local in the United States, Operating Engineers Local Union No. 3 (OE3), puts the labour issues front and center for me. Some of the more public concerns for labour are the rising costs of health care, the decline in union membership and the condition of pensions. Hardly a day can go by without a news article about the rising cost of healthcare and how it affects union members. The decline in union membership, which is at an all time low of about 10 percent, down from over thirty percent in the 1950's is also an ongoing concern as is an aging membership. The condition of pensions is a concern as unions face tougher restrictions and transparency rules governing the use and investment strategies of their pension monies.

I am by association, also a member of the larger International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) founded in 1896. OE3's (also known as Local 3) history dates back to 1939, when the joining of 16 smaller locals in the northern California area formed them. They have since grown to be the largest construction local in the United States with over 40,000 members with a jurisdiction covering four states (Northern California, Northern Nevada, Utah and all of Hawaii). Include relatively low pension returns over the past few years and an aging membership, and you have just a few of the issues facing Local 3 and labour in general in the United States. Labour has a deep history in the United States and a popular slogan, "Welcome to the weekend, brought to you by union labour," that highlights workers right to have a straightforward work week and not be abused in their labour by working excessive hours without pay. These rights have positively impacted non-union labour and stopped abuses to a large degree.

Around the globe unions continue to struggle to maintain their influence in the battle for workers rights and those in the United States are not exception. The large umbrella organization known as the AFL-CIO, the largest labour organization in the United States, of which the IUOE is a founding member, is experiencing some troubles of its own. Despite their troubles at home, they have continued to focus on the continuing global struggle. In 1997 the AFL-CIO established a non-profit organization called the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center) with a stated goal, to work with unions, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and other community partners to advance worker right and promote broad based sustainable economic development around the world (solidaritycenter.org 2006). In 2004 *The Solidarity Center* published a report titled, "Justice For All. The Struggle for Workers Rights in China" that chronicles the

history of the labour movement in China and some of the challenges that lie ahead for the largest country and workforce in the history of the world.

Union organizations in the United States like the AFL-CIO continue to put political pressure on their own government to send a message to China. Experts say the pressure is on, and with the rising trade deficit with China and loss of thousands of jobs to the Chinese, talk of trade penalties are making their way into the legislation, and it may come to that some day but it is too early to speculate on the outcome. Stephen Norton, a spokesman for the United States trade representatives, said,

In general, the administration believe that a strong and growing relationship with China, driven by mutual interests, is the best way to encourage economic, social and political reform in China. We hope that the continued engagement will be the best way to address the concerns we have with labour rights and working conditions in China (Greenhouse 2006)

The AFL-CIO, the largest labour organization in the United States is experiencing some troubles of its own. In the spring of 2006, a split between the leaders of the AFL-CIO and the leaders of some of their largest trade union members caused some of them to break away and start their own umbrella organization. A major reason stated for the split centered on how the AFL-CIO organises union labour, effectively “forcing” major unions to leave the organization and begin new organizing campaigns of their own under the new umbrella organization called, “Change to Win.” It is true that labour unions in the United States continue to lose membership and have in-fighting of their own but their troubles do not compare to a massive migrant work force in China that is in large part building the new China.

These two organizations still hold a lot of political clout and are behind a measure that would strengthen the rights of workers to join a union in the United States. This new measure named, "Employee Free Choice Act," would give workers the right to choose union membership when a majority of workers signed a card saying they want one. The bill would stiffen punishments for employers who intimidate workers trying to form a union (Economist 2006).

Working Conditions

What are the working conditions like in Beijing as they rush to complete the large projects before their stated deadline of December 31, 2007? They hope to complete the majority of large construction projects in Beijing by January 2008 to give the city eight months to literally let the dust settle. This gives new meaning to the phrase, "letting the dust settle" and brings to light the current impact on daily life in Beijing. Not only does the dust blow in from the Gobi desert in the famed dust storms, the noise and chemical pollution and dust from the many construction sites only adds to the impact on daily life in Beijing. Because of this and the increased congestion of Beijing during the day, city ordinances require that concrete trucks from the hundreds of factories around Beijing are allowed in the city center only after 11 p.m. and on weekends. This means that many of the workers must work long into the night curing concrete on these large construction sites (Wall Street Journal 2006).

In the documentary, *Concrete Revolution*, Xiaolu Guo details the construction industry in China and the dark side of the paving over of Beijing. Her telling documentary tells the story of these workers in personal interviews on the job sites and more (Guo 2005). During a personal visit to Beijing, I witnessed labourers

being dropped off as early as five o'clock in the morning. They appeared to be day labourers but others lived in small cramped quarters, oftentimes in the neighboring hutong or what's left of it. I spent a lot of time in old Beijing, the hutongs south of Tiananmen Square and those north of the Forbidden City, where I wandered on my bicycle to escape the traffic and noise of the "new" Beijing, the land of cars, gaudy department stores and new "villages" that are quickly replacing the hutongs. Figures vary but in Beijing alone, some estimates say that there are 2 million migrant workers who have drifted from China's farmlands. Many of the workers live right near the job site, in the heart of the city in shantytown barracks that would make even the heartiest of people shudder. These barracks are sometimes right next to or inside the hutong that borders the new development. Banks of phones are sometimes set up for migrants to make phone calls home as I witnessed in May 2005 in Beijing next to the 'Glory City' development which by now is probably completed. Some of these workers make as little as 50 cents an hour and work in hazardous professions (Wall Street Journal 2006).

These hutongs were full of children and old residents alike and, although they were dusty and crumbling to a certain degree, they have a charm and quiet unlike the "new" Beijing. Sean Gallagher of openDemocracy points out, according to UNESCO, in the past three years a third of the 62km squared area that makes up the central part of the old city has now been destroyed. This has displaced close to 580,000 people – one and a half times the total population of Washington D.C. (Gallagher 2006). The occasional rickshaw is likely now a tourist attraction and in the north part of the city, where groups of rickshaws provide tours of the historic hutong neighborhoods.

Wal-Mart's recent agreement to recognize unions in China has made headlines around the world. But Wal-Mart and other corporations, including Google, UPS, and Microsoft just to name a few have voiced their opposition to the pending Chinese legislation. They are calling it a "race to the bottom" as China continues to put downward pressure on the world's wages. It follows then that foreign corporations fear that a law protecting Chinese workers may eliminate their cheap labour costs (Feffer 2006). If approved and strictly enforced, specialists say the new laws would alter the labour market and alter wages of the average worker. According to Anita Chan, an expert on labour issues in the United States and a visiting fellow at the Australian National University, "If you really abide by Chinese labour laws, migrant-worker wages would go up by 50 percent or more (Barboza 2006)."

Working conditions of late have worsened in some of the SEZ set up over 20 years ago. Despite a growth rate of 28 percent in the SEZ of Shenzhen, recent worker turnover rates of 10 percent or more coupled with bad working conditions have helped spawn large-scale wildcat strikes and smaller job actions for better hours and wages (French 2006). These developments combined with what the ACFTU claims of 300,000 cases of labour abuse against the Chinese government may signal what Tim Costello of Global Labor Strategies says, "conceivably, we could see plant level work councils forming that would have the potential to work towards collective bargaining agreements."³

You can bet that if the ACFTU is reporting 300,000 cases, that they are many more that go unreported. Costello states "the labour system is built on instability where the turnover rate is very high. The CCP wants to control everything but they know they need to reform. People who are doing a lot of organizing are being

repressed. It is a system of reform and repression. The 'Draft Labour Contract law' is up for discussion at the next National Peoples Congress (NPC) later this year. The latest iteration of the law is expected to contain significant changes that will increase the rights of the workers. Some of the potential changes that are already being opposed by many US corporations are things like; inclusion of a 'Non-compete agreement' that will not allow you to work for more than one corporation, stability creating the mechanism for stabilizing the industry, severance pay for laid off workers but enforcement is always an issue (Costello 2007).

Workers Safety

Safety is always an issue in construction work and cranes are no exception. Construction is second only to coal mining for accidents each year. According to statistics in the first half of 2004, industrial accidents killed 350 people a day (Fishman 2004). Shanxi is China's main coal-producing region. Moreover, China mines and produces far more coal than any other nation on earth. Much of it is used in power stations to generate the electricity that is fueling China's remarkable industrial revolution (Blythe 2007).

Safety is a concern when a large construction project begins in any country in the world and accidents involving cranes are common. For example, on August 3, 2005, news agencies reported that in China, 13 workers were killed and two injured when a crane at a hydropower construction site in southwest China's Yunnan province collapsed. The crane accidentally fell down during operation, killing 10 workers on-the-spot and leaving another five seriously injured (PTI International 2005).

In an interview, Brian Mackwood, a retired crane operator and a member of Operating Engineers Local Union No. 3, since 1962 provided some insight to what it is like to be a crane operator. Although he never worked in Asia, he speculated that, like many of his jobs overseas, foreign companies would bring large crews and train local operators. Even with new crane certifications in place in California, foreign construction companies and those with non-union labour do not require as stringent requirements, and may be a contributing factor to accidents in China. He had the record for the largest “pick” in the world while working in Saudi Arabia for a petro-chemical company. “Pick” is the term used in the crane industry for the things that are picked up by the cranes. It took a crew of 30 people and a 750-ton crane to lift the 1,100-ton reactor in Saudi Arabia. He worked all over the world, learning five languages in the process. He said, “We usually lived on a “compound” where companies like Bechtel would bring in entire crews to build pipelines, power plants and other large construction projects.”

Corruption

In today’s Beijing, most job sites run round the clock tearing down and rebuilding a new Beijing (see figure 2).⁴ In the real estate world, location usually the best indicator of a properties worth and no place in China right now is more valuable than downtown Beijing. Location, location, location, these days in Beijing may mean, “eviction, eviction, eviction.” This growth and subsequent destruction and rebuilding, coupled with mounting labour concerns are a few of the things that could threaten the Olympic Games themselves and are among the many challenges still facing the Beijing government. Although there are still many well

maintained and livable hutongs in Beijing, those in the downtown area continue to disappear.

Although it can be argued that the graying of Beijing's skies is in large part due to the dust being blown in from the Gobi desert, China's environment is headed for disaster unless the green campaign of Beijing's Olympics spreads to other parts of the country. "Ignored for decades, even centuries, China's environmental problems have the potential to bring the country to its knees economically," argues Elizabeth Economy (The River Runs Black:2004). China's post World War II relationship with the environment took a turn for the worst when Mao's declared that man must "conquer nature and thus attain freedom from nature."

Shanghai has been the focus of recent government crackdowns on corruption and illegal use of pension monies. Underneath the boom and glitter of a city often used as the model of twenty-first century development, government officials have uncovered massive corruption. Not only were public monies used to fund massive construction projects, the plum contracts went to those who were well connected. The Communist Party admits that one of its biggest threat is corruption within its ranks and has sent investigators sniffing for official graft in other Chinese cities as well (Wall Street Journal 2007). Because Communist Party officials and private developers often work in tandem, many deals are tinged with corruption, recently forcing top party officials to campaign against illegal land seizures and evictions. Beijing vice mayor Liu Zhihua was removed from his post and accused of corruption. His portfolio included construction of the Olympic venues and final authority for citywide demolitions.

Where to from here?

As the Olympic Games approach, the focus will continue to be on Beijing as it prepares at breakneck speed to finish its many construction projects. Granted, they are much further along than the previous Summer Olympics holders such as Athens, but they are still under a lot of scrutiny. What legacy will remain for China and Beijing after the Olympics? Will it be a more harmonious society as the Hu-Wen administration continually reminds us? Will it be a China where the rights of workers are protected or will China continue to be the world's sweatshop as these games come and go? One thing is for sure, tourism will increase as a result of the Olympic Games, but the many natural and manmade tourist attractions—the Great Wall, the 2,200-year-old Terra Cotta Army at Xi'an, and Guilin with its beautiful scenery—already are drawing more and more tourists each year.

Health care, workers safety and compensation remain issues for construction workers, not only for the migrant workforce that is fueling the construction in many of the big cities, but the non-migrant construction workers and supervisors. Will the construction crane rise up and help to build a more harmonious society, one where nature and the likes of the White-naped crane can live together in harmony in the hills and valleys of the Yangtze River? As China move closer to its biggest coming out party ever, the August 2008 Summer Olympic Games, Beijing's stated goals and a requirement from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) require greater freedoms for journalists and news media. It's part of the bigger picture of more freedoms in general and the argument many used to give Beijing the nod in July 2001 for the 2008 games. Perhaps the construction crane will become the new symbol of longevity as China continues to create its own future. Labour will continue to be one of China's strongest assets going forward. We can only hope

that the abuse of labour lessens and stops altogether as China prepares to play a much larger role in world politics.

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Notes

¹ I took this photo of a bronze crane and an elderly woman in Beijing in May 2005 at a temple and lake north of the Forbidden City. The bronze is shiny at places where everyone rubs their hands on the crane for good luck. (Figure 1)



² Per Andrew Ross' footnote, see also Anita Chan, "Chinese Trade Unions and Workplace Relations in State-Owned and Joint Venture Enterprises," in Malcolm Warner, ed., *Changing Workplace Relations in Chinese Economy* (New York: St. Martin's 2000) pp. 34-56.

³ I interviewed Tim Costello of *Global Labor Strategies* on January 31, 2007. His organization is a leading source on developments in China. Phone interview with, Global Labor Strategies, 31 January 2007

⁴ I visited this jobsite at 10:00 pm and at 5:30 am, this photo being taken May 8, 2005 at 6:14am. Cranes could be seen working at all hours of the day and night with workers quarters located in the crumbling

neighborhood of the hutong bordering this development called “*Glory City*.” (Figure 2)



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