



**Ming-Sho Ho, *Working Class Formation in Taiwan: Fractured Solidarity in State-Owned Enterprises, 1945-2012,***

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, XVII + 247 p.

Éric Florence

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/7433>  
ISSN: 1996-4617

**Publisher**

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 September 2017  
Number of pages: 68-69  
ISSN: 2070-3449

**Electronic reference**

Éric Florence, « Ming-Sho Ho, *Working Class Formation in Taiwan: Fractured Solidarity in State-Owned Enterprises, 1945-2012,* », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2017/3 | 2017, Online since 01 September 2017, connection on 31 October 2017. URL : <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/7433>

---

This text was automatically generated on 31 October 2017.

© All rights reserved

---

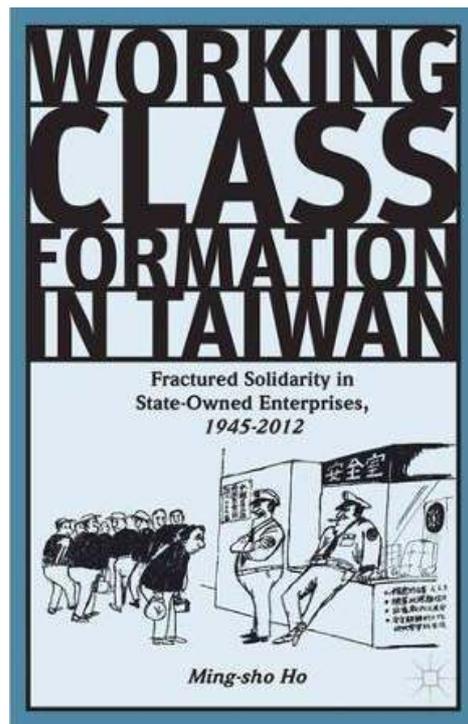
# Ming-Sho Ho, *Working Class Formation in Taiwan: Fractured Solidarity in State-Owned Enterprises, 1945-2012*,

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, XVII + 247 p.

Éric Florence

---

- 1 Ming-Sho Ho's *Working Class Formation in Taiwan* is a fine-grained socio-historical study of working class formation in Taiwan's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) between 1945 and 2012, focusing on the sugar and petroleum sectors.
- 2 In addition to 81 interviews with workers at the China Petroleum Corporation and 53 interviews with workers at the Taiwan Sugar Corporation, the author has made extensive use of historical and archival data as well as a large body of literature in labour studies. Ho's study is also based on his former work experience as a campaign staff member in the 1999-2000 union election at the China Petroleum Corporation and in 2001 as a member of a taskforce on privatisation for the union.
- 3 In Chapter One (pp. 1-15), Ho provides a thorough discussion of his approach, which is grounded in historical institutionalism.



Departing from the classic Marxist perspective, the author mobilises the theoretical assumption that studying working class formation does not require excluding “workers’ pursuit of non-class interests,” and that therefore a “working class may coalesce into collective action not because of their unity, but because of their internal divisions” (pp. 3, 5). Additionally, drawing on James C. Scott, Ho argues for not only considering large-scale collective action but also focusing on routine, unarticulated everyday resistance, which he calls “the question of nonobvious resistance” (p. 2).

- 4 Chapter Two (pp. 17-31) provides a historical background to Taiwan’s industrialisation and proletarianisation, combined with a review of the literature on labour in Taiwan, and a presentation of the condition of workers in the sugar and petroleum sectors in colonial times. Ho singles out his departure from existing literature in the field in that he feels this literature has overemphasised the extent of Taiwan workers’ quiescence and the supposed absence of a working-class consciousness, both understood as consequences of the classical Marxist paradigm. Having stressed scholarly neglect of the public sector, Ho argues for taking into account endogenous as well as exogenous factors – for instance, the gradual transformation of labour unions that set the stage for public and articulated forms of militancy – in accounting for the process of working class formation (pp. 20-21).
- 5 Ho then (Chapter Three, pp. 33-64) proceeds to examine how colonial ethnic domination of the labour market under Japanese rule was replaced in the post-war years by severe ethnic domination within factories in favour of mainlanders, who occupied most managerial positions while native Taiwanese predominantly staffed the bottom tier, a situation Ho refers to as “neo-colonial domination.” As he puts it, “Class subordination was reinforced by ethnic discrimination, creating a highly volatile polarized pattern, which finally exploded in the February 28 incident of 1947” (p. 43). Analysing the failed attempt at revolutionary insurgency that followed indiscriminate repression and severe social control in the aftermath of the February and March 1947 uprising, Ho argues that the experience of ethnic discrimination and internal division helped propel the insurgent militancy of SOE workers in the late 1940s (p. 64). This chapter also delves into the question of how to account for Taiwanese SOEs workers’ acceptance of severe ethnic discrimination. For the author, the majority of Taiwanese workers in SOEs preferred to silently endure ethnic discrimination so as to secure their jobs and the “cradle-to-grave welfare” that was out of reach for most Taiwanese people employed outside the public sector (p. 62).
- 6 The following chapter documents the establishment of the KMT’s dense system of surveillance through a vast network of agents. Ho shows, for instance, that up to 6% of the personnel on the payroll of the Taiwan Sugar Corporation in 1950 were hired to control their workmates (p. 57). The “white terror” that followed the 27 February 1947 events prevented virtually any form of organised collective action among workers for more than three decades. The union and associations such as women’s associations played an important role in the KMT’s largely unsuccessful efforts to improve workers’ political participation. But concomitant to this policing function, SOE workers were also provided with housing and access to a wide range of public goods and services such as welfare, schooling, cultural and sport facilities, etc. To some extent, SOEs in Taiwan, like mainland SOEs in the Mao era, played the dual function of enabling tight social control and monitoring a hierarchized allocation of public goods and services to workers. The second part of this chapter depicts workers’ reactions to political control and indoctrination by the KMT. Ho describes workers putting up a facade of consent while

actually experiencing apathy for political mobilisation, which Ho calls “ritualism” and which can be considered “a self-conscious effort to preserve personal autonomy from the Party-state extraction of workers’ loyalty” (p. 93). For instance, at the Taiwan Sugar Corporation, workers’ participation in monthly meetings organised by the KMT was described as being as low as 50% (pp. 90-91). Despite the limited success of the KMT’s attempts to mobilise SOE workers, this politics of partisanship still had the effect of further complicating divisions among the workers, Ho argues (p. 95).

- 7 In Chapter Five, Ho documents the impact of internal labour market reforms aimed at revitalising the state sector on the class formation and mobilisation of workers. In the 1960s, under the influence of US consultants who did not endorse the Taiwanese government’s emphasis on the public sector in the economy, the KMT agreed to liberalise trade and encourage the development of the private sector. It also adopted the system of “position classification,” which introduced a hierarchy within factories and enabled wider wage gaps among workers. As Ho puts it, “A purely technical solution became virtually the only option left in reforming the ailing state sector” (p. 99). The unintended consequence of this reform was to further aggravate divisions and tensions among workers as a third layer of “divisive politics” was added to ethnicity and partisanship. The author documents how this “politics of position,” which increased competition among workers, was highly detrimental to workers in lower positions in that it institutionalised hierarchies between staff, positions chiefly occupied by mainlanders, and operatives. Such hierarchies were actually extended to the whole array of public goods and services provided to workers in state-owned enterprises. Ho notes that while such hierarchies and status distinctions between staff and operatives had been established under Japanese rule, internal market reforms introduced in the 1960s further widened gaps between positions and made these status boundaries even more consequential upon workers’ everyday conditions. Facing such predicaments in professional mobility, workers increasingly turned to “personal ties” (*guanxi*) and “going through the back door” (*zou houmen*) in an attempt to attain better positions, further delegitimising performance as a means of professional advancement (pp. 112-113).
- 8 In the context of a changing political economy that turned Taiwan into a low-wage, export-oriented economy in the 1970s, in the next chapter (pp. 121-145) the author sheds light on worker strategies of “moonlighting” and “petty bargaining” from the mid-1970s to 1986. An increasing proportion of workers in SOEs decided to turn to the loosely-regulated private sector and ventured into private business along with their main professional occupation in SOEs. Relying on biographical evidence, Ho documents, for instance, how workers in the Taiwan Sugar Corporation engaged in the tea trade with the tacit acceptance of their superiors, and how most of their clients were actually co-workers (pp. 124-126). In addition to major changes in the economy, from the mid-1970s onward, political control in society and within factories became less salient as workers managed to use labour unions and KMT branches as mediating vehicles to voice their grievances and demands for better employment and welfare conditions. The chapter also examines how these political and economic changes impacted workers’ class formation and militancy.
- 9 Chapter Seven (pp. 148-179) then delves into the process by which, in a context of increasing labour contention through the 1980s and adoption of the 1984 Labour Standards Law, workers increasingly used unions as vehicles for collective action. The chapter examines the question of why this kind of “social movement unionism” took

place in factories in the petroleum industry while failing to do so in the sugar sector. Eventually, it sheds light on how social movement unionism gave way to “economic unionism.” Ho shows how labour activists in SOEs were chiefly Taiwanese and chose to ally with the political opposition to the KMT, i.e., the Democratic Progressive Party. He notes that criticisms voiced by the political opposition targeting lack of freedom or ethnic domination by mainlanders resonated among ordinary workers in SOEs. Ho’s enquiry into the Taiwan Petroleum Workers’ Union also enables him to tackle the generally accepted assumption that the political liberalisation of the late 1980s and 1990s prompted the labour movement. In Ho’s view, “Without the sustained challenge from below, the party-state infrastructure could have easily survived the external changes” (p. 155).

- 10 In the final chapter of the volume, Ho discusses the main empirical and theoretical insights of his study. Based on historical institutionalism, he argues for an understanding of class formation as “always contingent and constantly renegotiated.” Ho’s study shows that class contention in Taiwan’s SOEs relies on intraclass more than interclass divides (p. 186).
- 11 One of the merit of this very well-written and clearly argued volume is its departure from the depiction of Taiwanese SOE workers as voiceless and quiescent by describing workers’ everyday forms of coping with multi-layered systems of domination. Ho argues that understanding the turn towards more militant forms of labour politics and the changing role of unions in the late 1980s and 1990s requires taking seriously the role of everyday forms of worker action that have too often been dismissed as trivial by previous scholarship. While this is one of the strong arguments made by the author, one question left untouched by Ho is the issue of how the cumulated effect of everyday forms of workers’ resistance paves the way for organised collective action and for social change. One must say, however, that this question remains unresolved in scholarship on collective action. Moreover, while Ho provides interesting insights into how to categorise various forms of worker resistance, the issue of how individual practices may turn into collective resistance is on the whole left untouched.
- 12 The book benefits from an excellent use of biographical sources gathered by the author, which document the major historical transformations of the Taiwanese working class in SOEs over more than half a century. Another merit of the volume is in providing a balanced comparative perspective by constantly engaging with existing scholarship in the field of labour studies and by frequently contrasting the book’s findings with class formation on the mainland. For instance, regarding Lee Ching-Kwan’s qualification of different patterns of labour insurgency among workers in SOEs and in the private sector during the mainland’s post-Mao era (as respectively “protest of desperation” and “legalistic protest against discrimination”), the sheer absence of KMT branches and of labour unions in Taiwan’s private sector led to more spontaneous labour collective action such as strikes in the late 1980s and 1990s, while in the public sector, the labour movement was strongly shaped by the politics of ethnicity, partisanship, and position, along with reforms in the labour market (p. 157).
- 13 This book will be very valuable for scholars of labour studies as well as Taiwan studies. It will also be useful for undergraduate or graduate students as recommended reading in social sciences.

---

AUTHOR

**ÉRIC FLORENCE**

Éric Florence is the director of the CEFC ([eflorence@cefc.com.hk](mailto:eflorence@cefc.com.hk)).