

Book Review

Anita Chan, ed. (2011) *Walmart in China*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7731-7.

REVIEWED BY: Bridget Kenny, University of the Witwatersrand

Walmart in China is an important book. As debate rages around Walmart's operations beyond the United States, this book provides our first concentrated review of conditions at both ends of the supply chain in China, and it gives us an analysis of the effect of unions in Wal-Mart stores, important in the long-documented context of Walmart's anti-union stance.

As Anita Chan asks in her introduction, '[w]hat happens when the world's largest corporation encounters the world's biggest country?' (p. 1). The lasting impression given by this collection is of how the global weight of Walmart holds forth: codes of conduct mean very little; tiered subcontracting of suppliers degrade working conditions further; regularized (and illegal) underpayment of wages of retail employees are borne by workers with little choice; the tantalizing status of working for a global powerhouse propels the consent of others; and, the ambiguous role of unions – at once opening a potential collective space to workers and yet in practice kowtowing to management's power and broader politics – seems more like another layer of control. Yet the book hints at possible leverage points against the behemoth corporation, as when low margins have led some suppliers and producers to choose not to renew contracts with Walmart, as Xue Hong discusses. Or when the presence of the union assists managers to successfully resist de facto retrenchments (of managers), as Unger, Beaumont and Chan report. These kinetic possibilities are important to note in order to understand Walmart's position in the world economy as dynamic, itself subject to market fluctuation, state regulation, and worker and community organization. Overall, *Walmart in China* gives us a very useful foundation to continue to assess Walmart's adaptations as it expands unevenly across the globe, and it provides insight into how workers make sense of, consent to, and resist employment across Walmart's chain.

The book is divided into three sections which cover central issues in the debate around Walmart: the supply chain, the retail stores, and Walmart unions. It should be noted that in a context where labour research is difficult, chapters rely on diverse data, including media reports, worker blogs, undercover participant observation as workers or posing as naïve customers. These sources enliven more traditional survey and interview material to present a diversity of experiences.

Part One details Walmart supply chain dynamics, providing an integrated view into questions around labour conditions, codes of conduct, and Walmart procurement policies. Nelson Lichtenstein provides a useful overview of the changing relationship of Walmart to its global supplier base. Xue Hong details the range of Chinese suppliers who have accessed the Walmart supply chain, many through chains of subcontracting. The chapter engages with the standard argument that

Walmart cuts costs by eliminating the middleman by finding that in practice Walmart sometimes benefits from dealing with firms designed to mediate the relationship. It examines the impact of Ethical Standards, Walmart's programme of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and finds that monitoring does not pick up conditions in firms dispersed throughout the subcontracted chain. Yu Xiaomin and Pun Ngai's chapter focuses on toy manufacturers within Walmart's supply chain. It finds a race to the bottom in the labour conditions of toy manufacturers and evaluates CSR monitoring as ineffective. Anita Chan and Kaxton Siu compare the wages and working hours in toy and garment factories supplying Walmart. Their survey of 88 workers from 9 firms provides data which show that workers work longer than legal maximum hours per month and earn lower than minimum wages. They too find that Walmart's code of conduct does little to address excessive hours and poverty wages, and they show how workers' understanding of a fair wage is itself conditioned by low legal minimums.

Part Two examines experiences of employees within Walmart stores in China. We are reminded of C.W. Mills' sales workers, who were disciplined through belief in the status of their white collar jobs, but moreover in Chinese branches, the status of being employed by a 'Fortune 500' firm fuels pride in accessing a global cosmopolitan identity. David J. Davies describes store managers buy-in to Walmart's corporate culture as adapted for the Chinese context. Davies and Taylor Seaman continue the theme by presenting a popular blog written by one trainee manager who ultimately quits Walmart. The blogger critiques the limits of managerial authority, but also reaffirms his identification with the company to provide a window into how consent operates. Scott E. Myers and Anita Chan, too, make use of an anonymous blog of the everyday experiences of a line supervisor at a Walmart store. These reflections similarly indicate the feelings of ambiguity of a young, educated Chinese proto-professional entering the labour market in a foreign company. Eileen M. Otis details two different labour regimes operating simultaneously on shop floors at Walmart branches in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Direct employees of Walmart, the cashiers undergo 'techno-despotic' control through punitive monitoring of employees' speed and thoroughness of service using computer and surveillance technology; outsourced salespeople, hired by vendors to promote specific products, by contrast are controlled through an 'entrepreneurial hegemonic' regime that allows them more autonomy.

Part Three discusses the unexpected unionization of Walmart. As unions and federations from around the world queue to meet the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), these chapters give us insight into the process and the politics of how Walmart branches came to be organised. Anita Chan's chapter uses Chinese media reports to develop a timeline and an analysis of how grassroots was the organising and bargaining. Jonathan Unger, Diana Beaumont, and Anita Chan assess whether unionisation 'made a difference'. In the stores studied, researchers found that while Walmart regularized conditions of employment and pay, it nevertheless paid low rates and relied on part-time and casual labour. Still, workers seem to have 'virtually no expectations of the union' (p. 227). Workers perceived the union more as a social club than as a means for collective protection. The company controlled the union in many organised branches. However, the authors found that some potential for autonomous action existed at city or national level. The concluding chapter by Katie Quan assesses resistance to Walmart in China in comparison to the United States. This chapter reviews more recent protest and growing awareness of labour rights in China and uses

the US case of community-based campaigns around Walmart to argue for the importance of building US-Chinese union relations.

Bridget Kenny is Associate Professor in the Sociology Department, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. [e-mail: Bridget.Kenny@wits.ac.za]