

Title	Reviewed Work(s): Work and Inequality in Urban China by Yanjie Bian
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Brief Introduction	<p>By the 1980s, three generalizations about urban life in China were established by interviewing emigres and by direct observation in China. The first was that China's urban "work units" were a central focus of people's lives, providing a broad range of benefits and services, including housing. The second was that Party cadres benefited preferentially, and moreover they allocated privilege according to political loyalty. The third was that personal connections, or <i>guanxi</i>, could play an important role in obtaining scarce goods and opportunities. We knew that not all workplaces were able to provide good benefits, and also that political loyalty and <i>guanxi</i> were not the only criteria for advancement or benefit, or necessarily the most important. But we could not state very clearly how much variation there was in the provision of benefits, or how large were the advantages of cadres, those loyal to them or those who employed <i>guanxi</i>.</p> <p>Yanjie Bian's extraordinary book marks the emergence of a new generation in urban social research on China. He answers these lingering questions and also shows how things are changing as a result of reform. Bian, a native of China who received a doctorate in sociology in the United States, where he now teaches, conducted a sample survey of 1,000 Tianjin residents in 1988, and supplemented these data with material from 36 in-depth interviews and an impressive array of published Chinese language materials. He weaves a rich and fascinating portrait of the changing urban work unit.</p> <hr/> <p>Its richness is conveyed by the series of topics to which Bian devotes entire chapters. Readers will find answers to the following important questions. How do people get ahead, in terms both of attaining higher status occupations and working in a better work unit (chapter 4)? What role does <i>guanxi</i> play in getting a good first job and in subsequent promotions (chapter 5)? What determines the chances that an individual will become a Party member (chapter 6)? What individual or organizational characteristics influence salary and bonuses (chapter 7)? And what kinds of workplaces provide better housing and other benefits, and how large are the gaps (chapter 8)?</p> <p>The findings are reported in 30 figures and tables, many of which display coefficients from multiple regression analyses. Readers allergic to statistical analysis need not be deterred – the results are also conveyed in clear and readable prose. Some of the more interesting are that the career advantages of joining the Party are significant but are not as large as those of higher education; that <i>guanxi</i> helps significantly in obtaining a good first job but not in subsequent promotions; that education was no advantage in joining the Party before 1978 but has become so since then; that past wage gaps between work units of different type and rank have become larger during the reforms, as have gender differences, and that the wage gap between cadres and workers is also rising; and that housing</p>

space and quality is strongly affected by the rank of government that manages the work unit.

Bian's study leaves this reader with an overall impression of considerable continuity in the "traditional" role of China's work units, despite the changes wrought by reform. This book may be read both as a fine statistical description of today's urban work unit, or as a perceptive comparative study of social stratification. By both standards it is an important and timely contribution.

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