

De-standardized Labor in China's Public Sectors

Rong Liliang

Government and International Studies, HongKong Baptist University, Hong Kong

Abstract

Drawing on Labour Process Theory (LPT) and Critical Human Resource Management (Critical HRM), this article examines the formalization of informal employment in China's public sector. Based on thematic analysis of 136 labor dispute judgments and three months of participant observation in a county-level Human Resources and Social Security Bureau, the study investigates how reforms intended to regulate "bianwai" (non-established) employment reshaped labor relations. The findings show that formalization did not generate universal labor protection. Instead, the reform divided workers into recognized and unrecognized categories, enabling selective incorporation, compliant downsizing, and the transfer of labor market risks onto vulnerable workers. Legal interpretation further functioned as a mechanism of labor control by limiting compensation claims, narrowing recognition of labor relations, and weakening equal-pay protections. The article argues that public-sector formalization reforms can simultaneously operate as projects of labor governance and mechanisms for redistributing insecurity under fiscal and administrative pressures.