

Wei Wei University of Oxford

Tony Royle University of York

Title of paper: Workplace regimes and social embeddedness: a comparative case study of McDonald's in China and the UK

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Workplace regimes and social embeddedness: a comparative case study of McDonald's in China and the UK

This paper presents a comparative study of employment relations practices at one leading multinational enterprise in a low-end service sector - the McDonald's Corporation in two different countries (China and the UK). In doing so, this paper applies Burawoy's notion of 'workplace regimes' (1985) to understand the connections between the labour process and national institutional settings. In addition, the concept of 'social embeddedness' (Granovetter, 1985) which suggests that individuals' behaviours are closely embedded in networks of interpersonal/social relations is applied to provide nuanced views on the dynamic relationships between managers and workers, especially around worker responses. We asked what kind of workplace regimes exist at McDonald's China and McDonald's UK, what managerial controls and workers' responses are in these workplace regimes and how external institutional and social embeddedness shape employment relations practices and the interactions between actors at McDonald's China and UK.

To address the research questions, multiple research strategies are adopted, and various sources of data are collected in this study. First, participant observation was conducted at McDonald's stores in both China and the UK. One author worked full-time at a McDonald's store for five weeks in China and worked part-time at a store for fifteen weeks in the UK. Second, 51 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with (ex)-employees and (ex-) store-level managers at McDonald's in both China and the UK, in addition to interviews with two officials from central government and one official from trade union in China, and one union organizer from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union in the UK. Third, an analysis of documentary materials, including reports and newspaper articles in the media, operation reports from McDonald's, and documents from governments or trade unions, regulatory and policy documents relating to labour standards in both China and the UK has been carried out.

At McDonalds China, the workplace regime is termed as 'segmented hegemonic despotism'. On the one hand, hegemonic features remain in the form of considerable state intervention on standard employment, in terms of full-time hourly paid workers who are employed on labour contracts; on the other hand, due to the regulatory void in terms of employment status, more than two third of hourly-paid workers at stores are student workers and retirees, who are employed on service agreements and not protected by labour laws. At McDonald's UK, the

workplace regime is one of flexible despotism (Chun, 2001), which is reflective of the external deregulated and flexible labour market in the UK, and a vast majority of workers are based on zero-hour contracts. In both workplace regimes, employment status and working time are manipulated by store-level managers to seek control over employees.

However, the findings suggest that different control styles and divergent worker responses are revealed in workplace regimes at McDonald's in two countries. At McDonald's China, store-level managers exert paternalistic control over workers, whilst a form of 'coalition consent' has been forged between students and female middle-aged workers. In contrast, at McDonald's UK, workers faced a higher level of arbitrary control, while managers had few constraints placed on them by legal regulations. A co-existence of supine acquiescence and significant resistance (four strikes from 2017 to 2019) is generated under the arbitrary control system of the UK.

Workplace regimes at McDonald's in China and the UK reflect the external employment relations institutions. Moreover, workers' social embeddedness plays a role in their responses to managerial control. At McDonald's China the trust and networks built between students and middle-aged female workers lead to the coalition consent. At McDonald's UK, trust built among workers with the same sense of justice and political (or union) consciousness and external support from unions triggered the strikes.

The paper concludes that workplace regimes not only represent the dynamic interactions between managers and workers, but also are influenced by external institutions and actors' social embeddedness.