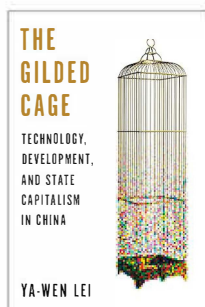


Ya-Wen Lei · 2023

## The Gilded Cage: Technology, Development, and State Capitalism in China.

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*The Gilded Cage* is a breathtakingly ambitious book. Most sociological monographs today “choose their battles wisely” – they drive home a small number of conceptual points, establish methodological novelty in one or two respects, or provide empirical illumination in a clearly delimited space of problems. Lei’s new book does it all at once, and does so not just in any problem space, but in one of the most relevant and contested contemporary fields – 21st century Chinese capitalism.

Just a few of the things the book succeeds at: *The Gilded Cage* rescues Daniel Bell’s theory of power in the postindustrial society from the dead; it establishes the existence of a new developmental regime in China called techno-developmentalism; it reconstructs the emergence, geographical diffusion, and internal contradictions of that regime historically; it demonstrates how “technological development” has become an almost mind-numbing cultural scheme in Chinese society, overriding most other concerns; it reconstructs the rise and current societal role of Chinese Big Tech; and it documents ongoing mergers between party-authoritarian

governance, industrial policy, faith in quantification and indicators, and data-based social control. The book is not just a macrosociological account, but traces all of these issues down to the shopfloor and street levels and to the everyday experience of administrators, citizens, managers, and workers, with a keen eye on contradictions and social conflict. Almost all of the book is based on a huge amount of original archival, ethnographic, and interview data, which are meticulously documented and discussed.

Perhaps most remarkable, *The Gilded Cage* does all this and still reads fluently as a coherent whole – it is remarkably well-crafted and well-written. The metaphor holding Lei’s account together is that of the *birdcage*. In that vision of state-economy relations, the state nurtures desirable economic forces as “birds” in a “cage” of political-administrative control and selective intervention. At its narrative core, the book demonstrates how symbolic notions of desirable and obsolete, new and old, rising and declining “birds” have changed over time – with far-reaching consequences for administrators as well as subjects of the “bird”/“cage” logic.

The book is structured into eight major chapters, two of which reconstruct the historical emergence of techno-developmentalism and six of which take readers through the major arenas of this new socioeconomic regime.

Chapter 2 documents that the ideational and structural seeds of techno-developmentalism were already present in China’s labor surplus-driven accumulation regime. Key features the chapter finds dormant in China’s “factory of the world” era are widespread elite beliefs in the scientific management of development, strong popular beliefs in the beneficial nature of science and technology, and

an indicator-heavy control structure of the political-administrative system. Lei speaks of an emerging “scientization of statecraft” (p. 64).

Chapter 3 shows how the surplus labor- and manufacturing-intensive developmental regime increasingly fell out of fashion after the Great Financial Crisis. Change was led by coastal regions in reaction to the economic and environmental limits of the old growth model as well as by key elites, such as Xi, who, Lei shows, had a history of experimenting with science and technology-oriented developmental interventionism. Of particular force are the chapter’s illustrations of how the techno-developmental logic seeped into indicator-based evaluation systems for citizens, firms, and local administrators. Lei demonstrates how state favors, financial and political access, and plain citizenship rights are now deeply tied to the goal of furthering science and technology and technological upgrading.

Chapters 4 and 5 move down to the shopfloor and regional level to show how this developmental logic changes the lived experience of capitalists and workers now deemed “obsolete” or in need of being “upgraded.” Lei documents selective regulatory overenforcement and systematic harassment to root out “old birds.” The level of open discontent is surprisingly limited – often on the basis of a consensus around national upgrading goals. Particularly in the field of policies around “robotization,” the chapters also highlight the irrationalities of the process when street-level administrators, managers, and workers try to find creative ways to bring together unrealistic robotization goals with actual economic practice. “From the process, I have realized that the human body is magic,” one of Lei’s informants summarizes the experience with robotization on the ground (p. 147).

Chapters 6 to 8 trace the regime into the digital economy. The book gives a deep account of the rise of China's big tech sector as an incremental "para-public" amalgamation between the state's interests in instrumental power and technological upgrading and big corporations striving for data-based accumulation. In the sphere of work, Big Tech's rise implies that surplus labor is increasingly absorbed by precarious gig and platform work, rather than by the factory. Again, Lei documents widespread disillusionment but a resilient consensus with catch-up developmental policies, even among those vastly underprivileged in China's digital economy. Following up on Daniel Bell's thoughts about knowledge elites in post-industrial society, Lei also investigates privileged digital economy workers with prestige technical education – what she calls "Coding Elites." Yet, even here the book documents ambivalence and the human grind techno-developmentalism inflicts on Chinese society.

*The Gilded Cage* is more than a book for regional or subject specialists. It pushes the agenda for economic sociology and political economy in several respects. One key move that should prove instrumental to a wide range of socioeconomic scholarship concerns Lei's innovative coupling of comparative historical macrosociology with shopfloor- and street-level qualitative analyses. The book deploys analyses of micro- and meso-arenas not just for illustrative purposes, but to guide macrosociological description and theory-building. This style of shopfloor-grounding of work on socioeconomic regimes used to be at the core of comparative work in economic sociology, and Lei's book shows why it is well worth revisiting. In particular, recently revived work on industrial policy and the developmental state – which in

large part is driven by analyses of declarative elite material – would benefit from a return to microsociology, not least to work out that not all that is gilded is gold in 21st century developmentalism.