

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Professor Ching Kwan Lee

Wednesday 7 September, 15:30-16:30
The Great Hall

“Prairie Fires or Flickering Lights? Reflections on Recent Labor Unrest in China”

Since 2010, large-scale strikes in prominent foreign-owned manufacturers in China have inspired a narrative of “worker empowerment”. Scholars and journalists alike are optimistically forecasting a new era of labor activism, spearheaded by a second generation of migrant workers who are reportedly more social media savvy and rights conscious than the first. This talk critically assesses this empowerment thesis, drawing on ethnographic data on the micro-mobilizational dynamics of recent strikes and surveys of labor market trends, all in the context of China’s transition to a new normal of slow growth, overcapacity and heightened state repression on civil society.

Ching Kwan Lee teaches sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include labor, political sociology, development, ethnography, China and the Global South. She is author of *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (University of California Press 1998), *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (University of California Press 2007), and *The Specter of Global China: Contesting Chinese State Investment in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming). In 2008, she won the Sociology of Labor Book Award in the American Sociological Association, Labor and Labor Movement Section for her book ‘Against the Law’. She is currently working on two projects, the first focuses on Chinese investment and labor practices in Zambia, a major copper producer and the site of the first of several Chinese-run Special Economic Zones in sub-Saharan Africa. The second project is an ethnographic study of the Chinese grassroots state and looks at the micro-foundations of durable authoritarianism in China.



Chair: Mark Stuart, University of Leeds