

The Political Economy of Pneumoconiosis in China's Mining Industry

Timothy Kerswell and Zihong Deng

Abstract

Pneumoconiosis is one of the most significant occupational diseases in China. We argue the key driver behind pneumoconiosis prevalence and consequent limited treatment is a balance of power significantly favoring capital over labor. The political and economic history of China has included a systematic weakening of the position of labor through unfettered marketization and weak trade unions. This is especially true for the mining sector, where pneumoconiosis is an occupational risk. The changed structure of the mining industry, the lowering standards of labor protection, the decentralization of taxation and associated inequalities between provinces, and the generation of surplus labor associated with the household responsibility system have all played their part in the pneumoconiosis outbreak. Several policy

Timothy Kerswell is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau. Correspondence should be sent to timothykerswell@umac.mo.

Zihong Deng is a PhD candidate in the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Australia.

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issues have exacerbated the sufferings of pneumoconiosis-stricken workers that we explore in this article. On a grassroots political level, the absence of effective unions in China, including in the mining industry, provides a compelling explanation for why these policy issues have not been addressed.

By the end of 2018, the cumulative reports of occupational disease had been more than 970,000 cases, of which around 870,000 were occupational pneumoconiosis cases, constituting around 90 percent.¹ While these are the official figures, one NGO, the Charity Fund of Love Save Pneumoconiosis (大愛清塵 *dà'ài qīngchén*), conservatively estimated the number of pneumoconiosis patients at 6 million in China.² Silicosis and coal workers' pneumoconiosis have always been the main pneumoconiosis in China, amounting to about 90 percent of the total number of reported cases.³ The disease tends to be incurable and has a long incubation period. Treatment, which usually is expensive, only slows the rate of eventual mortality. Without proper protection policies, a large number of households with pneumoconiosis patients have great difficulty surviving.

While China's government has indicated a willingness to take occupational diseases seriously, there are clear contradictions in the understanding of the leadership. Take for instance the statement to coal mine workers by President Hu Jintao that productivity should be increased.⁴ This contradicts the reality that to combat pneumoconiosis and increase mine safety generally, productivity must decrease. Throughout this article, policy at both the macro and micro levels is shown to be strongly connected with pneumoconiosis and the ongoing experiences of sufferers and their families.

Most research concerning pneumoconiosis in China has come from a medical perspective. Such articles consider questions of exposure risk, mortality, disease incidence rates, or the effects of pneumoconiosis itself.⁵ There are limitations to what medical science can offer regarding a social, economic, or political understanding of pneumoconiosis, with political economy much more suited to a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Political economy research on mine safety in China has concentrated on issues that produce immediate fatalities such as mine collapses and explosions. These issues have been discussed in the contexts of the gradual erosion of workers' rights in China, comparative studies