

DOCTORAL THESIS

Workers' everyday lives and the transformation of China's post-reform state-owned enterprises

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ABSTRACT

The interweaving of China's "reform and opening-up" policy of 1978 with globalisation has shifted the landscape of Chinese economic geographies (CEGs). With influential economic, social, and ideological functions, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) vividly illustrate the multiple political economic, geographic, and socio-cultural dimensions of these changes. Regions with concentrations of SOEs have been particularly impacted. This includes North East (NE) China, which historically held the highest proportion of employment in SOEs and has witnessed the closure of many SOEs and regional decline.

Explanations of these changes emphasise the structural and institutional mechanisms of reform under globalisation. I argue this extensive literature regards workers as passive factors of production and limits discussions of space and time. Drawing on scholarship on Global Production Networks (GPNs) and Assemblages, I propose a new conceptual framework that positions the everyday life of each worker at the heart of SOE transformation. My central research question is: "how are workers' everyday lives implicated in SOE transformation?" I explore this by re-reading transformation as the coming together of reform under globalisation with the lived experiences, practices, and affective encounters of workers' everyday lives. The novelty of this framework leads me to sketch three general research propositions rather than setting formal hypotheses.

I address the research question and demonstrate my framework by using qualitative research methods and building grounded theory. To explore the differentiated ways in which SOEs are transforming, I studied 13 SOEs from three major cities of NE (Harbin, Changchun, and Shenyang). A three-phase research design was deployed. I completed 62 individual and 8 group interviews. To increase the reliability and replicability of the results, I triangulated data by considering in-depth interviews, public policy documents, internet forums, movies and magazines, and on-site field observation.

The empirical findings are presented in three chapters which depict, respectively, the lived experiences, practices, and affective encounters of everyday life. First, I explore workers' lived experiences of social relations in the context of reform and

their link to specific spatial arrangements. I characterise interdependent social relations and spatial arrangements constitute the socio-spatial formations. The next chapter further explores workers' mobile and immobile practices and the changing meanings of time and space of SOE socio-spatial formation. Third, I describe how encounters and affects give rise to intensity of feelings which reproduces practice and impacts the SOE socio-spatial formation. In a nutshell, understanding SOEs as socio-spatial formations implies that transformation is not "meted out" by a state or abstract market force but an "always already present" process of mutual constitution of lived experiences, practices, and affective encounters in everyday life.

Overall, my thesis expands economic geographic knowledge by highlighting the ongoing and processual nature of space and time and, more specifically, by valorising worker agency. I reflect on implications for CEG to combine with cultural and social geographies. I conclude by calling for an ontological shift of focusing on the emergence and contingency of CEGs.

Keywords: China, State-owned Enterprises, Everyday Life, Immobility, Mobility, Worker, Affect, Encounter

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Background and Research Problem	1
1.2 Research Gap and Research Question	4
1.3 Definitions and Terms	7
1.4 Chapter Outline	9
2 Literature Review	11
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 Recent Research on Chinese Economic Geography	11
2.2.1 <i>Economic Geography and Pre-reform China</i>	13
2.2.2 <i>Economic Geography and Post-reform China</i>	16
2.3 State-owned Enterprises and Reform under Globalisation	20
2.3.1 <i>Stages of SOE Reform</i>	20
2.3.2 <i>Impacts of Reform on the Relationship between SOEs and Chinese Society</i> ...	22
2.3.3 <i>Globalisation and SOEs</i>	24
2.3.4 <i>Summary</i>	26
2.4 Global Production Networks	27
2.4.1 <i>GPN theory</i>	27
2.4.2 <i>Insights of GPN for SOEs</i>	29
2.4.3 <i>Limitations</i>	31
2.4.4 <i>Summary</i>	32
2.5 Assemblage Theory	33
2.6 Conceptual Framework	36
2.6.1 <i>Re-conceptualising SOE Transformation</i>	37
2.6.2 <i>Elaboration of Conceptual Framework</i>	39
2.7 Summary	41
3 Research Design	42
3.1 Grounded Theory	42
3.1.1 <i>Introduction</i>	42
3.1.2 <i>Phased Approach</i>	44
3.2 Data Collection	46

3.2.1 Pilot Phase	46
3.2.2 Intensive Phase.....	46
3.2.3 Triangulation Phase.....	48
3.3 Respondent Characteristics.....	49
3.4 Data Analysis	51
3.5 Assessment of Research Design.....	53
3.6 Summary.....	54
4 Social Relations, Spatial Arrangements, and SOEs as Socio-spatial Formations ..	56
4.1 Introduction.....	56
4.2 Social Relations in Everyday Life.....	56
4.2.1 Iron Rice Bowls (<i>Tie fan wan</i>)	56
4.2.2 Seniority and Hierarchy (<i>Lun zi pai bei</i>)	63
4.2.3 Interpersonal Relations (<i>Guanxi</i>).....	66
4.3 SOE Spatial Arrangements	70
4.3.1 Segregated Stabilities.....	70
4.3.2 Multi-scalar (<i>Im</i>)mobilities	74
4.4 SOEs as Socio-spatial formations	81
4.5 Summary and Further Research Directions.....	83
5 Practices, (Im)mobilities, and Socio-spatial Formations	85
5.1 Introduction.....	85
5.2 Employment Practices and (Im)mobilities.....	86
5.2.1 Job-Leaving (<i>Li Zhi</i>)	86
5.2.2 Positional Promotion (<i>Sheng Zhi</i>).....	90
5.2.3 Part-time Job (<i>Jian Zhi</i>).....	94
5.3 SOE Social-spatial Formations through (Im)mobilities	97
5.3.1 Workers' Immobile Practices and SOE Segregated Stabilities.....	97
5.3.2 Workers' Mobile Practices and SOE Multi-scalar (<i>Im</i>)mobilities.....	104
5.4 Summary and Further Research Directions.....	111
6 Encounters, Affects and Socio-spatial Formations	114
6.1 Introduction.....	114
6.2 Encounters, Feelings, and Affects.....	115
6.2.1 Encounters with Everyday Work.....	115
6.2.2 Encounters with Workmates.....	119
6.2.3 Encounters with Family Members.....	122
6.3 Affects, Practices, and SOE Socio-spatial Formation.....	124
6.3.1 Affective Stabilities.....	125
6.3.2 Affective Mobilities.....	128

6.4 Summary and Further Research Directions.....	130
7 Conclusion and Discussion	132
7.1 Summary.....	132
7.2 Significance and Contribution to Knowledge.....	135
7.3 Limitations of Research.....	137
7.4 Further Research Directions.....	138
Appendix.....	140
Reference.....	146