The Leisurely Office

Paper submitted to
The Fifth Conference of Critical Management Studies (CMS5)
Manchester UK, 11-13 July 2007

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Doctoral researched started in September 2004
Abstract

This article presents preliminary findings from my Ph.D research in a Chinese bureaucratic organization, and is structured around one particular piece of data which I have called ‘the leisurely office’. Applying Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space, the article inspects the interplays of the spatial design, practice and experience of the organization. It argues that the bureaucratic power that gives birth to the organization’s workspace has a double-nature in that it is at once power-as-hierarchical and power-as-personal. This double-natured bureaucratic power in turns legitimizes ‘the leisurely office’ not as a form of resistance, but as a reinforcement of itself. In conclusion the article invites further insights on the ‘softer’ sides of the Weberian iron-cage.
The present article serves a dual purpose. It is partly an outline of my ongoing Ph.D research in a Chinese bureaucratic organization (hereinafter referred to as ‘the bureau’), and partly, a tentative exploration on one piece of data that I find particularly interesting. The Ph.D research is a twelve-month ethnographic study, aiming generally at understanding the power relations in the organization through its workspace; and the interesting data is what I call ‘the leisurely office’: the seemingly paradoxical existence of an extremely free work-environment within a rigidly hierarchical bureaucratic organization. It is my hope that discussions around the leisurely office will bare fruitful thoughts on bureaucratic power in general.

The article is organized in the following way. It starts with a literature review on organization space in order to situate the Ph.D research within a general theoretical framework. This is followed by selected findings of the research, including the piece of data on the leisurely office. The article ends with a brief discussion and conclusion which indicates questions that the research is interested to explore in its future stages.

**Theorizing space**

There are at least three ways in which the organizational space comes under researchers’ attention (Hernes, 2004; Spicer and Taylor, 2004). The first approach focuses on the pure physical aspect of space. Under this approach, organizational space is seen to comprise of measurable distance and proximity between people, walls, tools, and other physical objects. Such distance and proximity, it is further assumed, has direct impact on the routine functioning of organization. For instance, ergonomic studies chart the appropriate distances between workers bodies and the tools they use during their work day (Allen, 1977). Others examine how the spatial positioning of workers results in different patterns of social interaction (Oldham and Brass, 1979; Hatch, 1987; Gieryn, 2002) and organizational knowledge sharing (Prior, 1988).

A second approach examines organizational space as a mental chimera; one that manifests itself in individual and collective patterns of perception, interpretation and aesthetical appreciation. According to this approach, space is subjectively constructed, as
well as (or rather than) physically given; and this process of construction has been analysed in several ways. Firstly, organizational space comes to life through symbols scattered in space, which are in turn cognitively interpreted and received by space dwellers (Gagliardi, 1990; Turner, 1990, Burrell and Dale, 2003), secondly, space is thought to be constructed on the pre-cognitive level of aesthetical feelings (Strati, 1996; Carr and Hancock, 2003), and finally, symbols and aesthetics may have been designed into the workspace for managerial purposes, but occupants are always free to experience them in ways other than what are intended, thanks to their subjectivity and different personal backgrounds (Halford, 2004; Yanow, 1998).

A third theoretical approach recognises that the construction of organizational space is first and foremost about establishing and maintaining patterns of social domination. Building on Marxist (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 1990) and more recently Foucauldian motifs, such ‘critical’ theories approach organizational space as the solidification of systems of control. Researchers working in this tradition have investigated how modern organizational strictly ascribes status and hierarchy into physical space (Baldry, 1997, 1999), facilitate managerial surveillance and control (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Jacques, 1996), and advantageously manipulate the boundaries between home and work (Nippert-Eng, 1995; Perlow, 1998; Surman, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2004).

The Ph.D study follows upon the third (social) approach to organizational space. A major source of inspiration this approach comes from Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of socially produced space (Cairns, McIntire and Roberts, 2003; Spicer and Taylor, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Ford and Harding, 2004; Watkins, 2005). Space, of which office building form a subcategory, must be viewed primarily as the product of social relations. Lefebvre elaborates the process of spatial production through his triad model of perceived/conceived/lived space (1991: 8-38), which could be spelt out in lieu to organizational contexts:

1. The ‘conceived space’ refers primarily to ‘the space of scientists, planners, urbanists … and social engineers’ (Ibid: 38). In the organizational context it typically involves a whole range of expert activities such as office allocation planning, architecture,
interior design, and production flow planning.

2. The ‘perceived space’ refers to behaviours of space dwellers and material flows that are perceivable within a given physical space. In a business organization it could be made up of bodily movements and interaction of employees, and the everyday transactions of cash, information and other material goods.

3. In between the ‘conceived’ and ‘perceived’ space there is the ‘lived space’; which is the space as experienced, felt, interpreted, imagined – in short, ‘lived’ – by space users. It does not necessarily accord with the ways the space is designed, nor is it perceivable, but always remains in variant, yet at the same time, related, to both (Elden, 2004).

Lefebvre’s descriptions of conceived and lived space share much in common with the physical and mental approaches of organizational space, while that of the perceived space embodies elements of both. Lefebvre calls each composing part of the model a ‘moment’ in the production of social space (Ibid: 40). In the logical sense of the word, a ‘moment’ is an inseparable part of the whole (Sokolowski, 1974). Thus, central to Lefebvre’s model is the emphasis that space must be approached from multiple perspectives. The physical and mental approaches generate important insights on organizational space, but such insights remain limited when restricted to themselves, for they fail to capture the social aspect of space. Lefebvre’s model suggests that the understanding of space as socially produced can be achieved when the three constituting parts – and in the organizational context, the design, practice and experience of organizational space – are analyzed together, and their interactions clarified.

In my view, Lefebvre’s theory contributes to the researches on organizational space in three ways. First, it provides a comprehensive definition of space. Physical space, mental space, and social space refer to the same set of pure extension, only at different analytical levels. By the same token, it justifies the social approach as a proper and fruitful means of enquiry, not because it differs from the other two approaches in nature, but because it incorporates and builds on them and while at the same time, transcends them. Finally,
Lefebvre’s triad model provides an analytical tool for the unraveling of social relations that give birth to a given organizational space. In what follows, the article will apply Lefebvre’s model to study the office building of a bureaucratic organization in China. Sources of data include the ethnographic diary, transcripts of interviews and organizational documents that have been collected during the course of the Ph.D research.

Findings

Spatial design – the straight-forward space

Few people who have visited the bureau HQ could be unimpressed by the symbolism of hierarchical power that is written in the design of its very appearance. Situated on an artificial platform some two metres elevated from the pavement, the building consists of twenty-seven floors, far too spacious for a routine staff force of three-hundred. The two main facets of the building slope slightly inward vertically, and the whole structure shapes a little similar to an Aztecan pyramid (picture 1 & 2). The blueprint justifies this rather usual design as an effort to ‘highlight, in visual effect, the southwest corner of the roof’; unsurprisingly, that particular corner is the location of the head-director’s office suite.

The internal layout of the building follows strictly the hierarchical differentiation of its dwellers. The building consists of three functional strata in the order of employees’ ranks (5th to 11th for auxiliary departments, 12th to 22nd, ordinary administrative departments, and 23rd to 25th, directors). Building facilities are designed on the same logic. Directors, for instance, have direct access to express elevators, while most auxiliary staffs rely on just one
emergency lift for daily transportation within the building. Usually, eight ordinary staffs share
an office equipped with plastic desks and chairs, their privacy secured only by separating
panels (picture 3). Department chiefs have larger offices, armchairs and fake-mahogany
desks (picture 4). Directors enjoy personal office suites, with built-in bathrooms, real-wood
furniture and genuine artistic works as decoration. The only bath-tub in the building is found
in the head-director’s office.

Messages of hierarchical differentiation are not only displayed; they are in effect
accentuated in the design of the building. They are accentuated, firstly, at the cost of the
rational principles of cost-efficiency. As an IT crew, Shen was involved in the layout of the
internet connections at the early stage of internal decoration. He recalls that the initial plan
proposes the IT centre to be located on the seventeenth floor, right in the middle of the
administrative strata, in order to minimize the cost of cables. The plan was refuted by the
high management, and the thirteenth floor was chosen instead. ‘The reason was never
openly stated,’ Shen says, ‘but we all got the message: as a peripheral division we are not
entitled to stay that high.’ Contrary to this act of wanton extravagance are those of extreme
frugality, which, nevertheless, serve the same purpose. The fire-escape of the building is
seldom used by ordinary employees and is thus marginally decorated with polished cement
and common upholsters. One finds, however, right in the middle of the flight that connects
the twenty-second (the end of the administrative strata) and twenty-third (the beginning of the
executive strata) floors, a drastic change of decoration materials (picture 5). Apparently the
bureau is not in short of money to upgrade the entire sixteen steps of the flight; the reason
why it is willing to spend money on eight of them could only be explained by the meticulous attentions the spatial design has on boundaries that demarcate realms of different hierarchical orders.

The spatial design of the building, in short, is bluntly straight-forward. The bureau makes no reservation to display spatial messages of power distance to a degree that these messages almost shout out to be noticed. This straight-forwardness, however, stands in sharp contrast with the ambiguity observed in spatial practices.

**Spatial practice – the ambiguous space**

At first glance, employees’ everyday behaviours within the bureau match exactly the high power distance emphasized by the spatial design of it. This could be observed, firstly, in the *bodily positions* that employees are careful to keep. It is a customary practice for a staff to make way for his superior before entering an elevator or toilet, and when two employees happen to share a car, the most comfortable seat is reserved for the one with higher rank in almost all cases. Two employees may be equal in official rank, yet such equality is always measured against other criteria, such as one’s seniority, or personal relations with members of the high management, when it comes to bodily positioning, and as a result, three-hundred staff practically has three-hundred hierarchical positions. As an example, the bureau has thirteen (deputy) directors at the time of the research, and before each large convention, the directors would march towards the panel in a single file. The order of that file is practiced with utmost precision, so much so that any change of the order usually forebodes promotion or
Language is another aspect where the strict hierarchical differentiation in design is materialized into practice. It is most rare that a junior officer would address his superior by name; instead, he would call his supervisor by the latter’s family name plus working title. Liu has just been promoted to be the chief of his division recently. He tells about his ‘unnatural’ experience when he finds his colleagues, with whom he has been going to badminton games and drinking parties for the last five years, suddenly addressing him as ‘chief Liu’. ‘I feel uncomfortable’, Liu admits, ‘but I cannot tell them not to do that, for that is the way I used to call my boss’. Indeed, one could observe a ritual of small talks within the bureau, in which senior officers, as an extreme token of being respectable, lose even their family names. ‘How are you, Leader?’ ‘Busy recently, Leader?’ While sometimes the word ‘leader’ is lively intoned to express a sense of jovial affinity, one should never doubt the speaker’s sincerity when he pronounces it. The following conversation with a colleague is quoted from my diary:

Colleague: Chief Li is still on his business trip…

Me: Yeah Li Bin (the name of ‘chief Li’) has always been a busy man.

Colleague (emphatically): Leader Li is a busy man…

Unsurprisingly, senior officers’ orders are taken very seriously by her/his subordinates to a degree that verges on inhumanity. It is not uncommon for employees to spend overnight in the office for urgent tasks, even days if required, with no rest and no overtime pay at all. Quite often, such orders are equally potent outside work. In the middle of new-year party, the head-director thanked everyone for their hard work and wished them to enjoy themselves at the party. Suddenly, one after another, deputy directors and division chiefs (in proper orders, of course) scrambled to their feet to give a performance of singing, quite regardless of their capability of performing that ordeal after a good deal of alcohol. After the party I overheard a deputy director (a respectable-looking man in his sixties) talking to his colleague, obviously trying to extricate his poor performance, ‘the boss wants us happy, what else can I do?’

Spatial practices within the bureau, however, are by no means as unanimous in character as spatial planning. Equally prevalent are behaviours that, given the above
descriptions of inhumane rigidity in respect for hierarchical orders, seem paradoxically ‘all-too-human’. One interesting phenomenon is the existence of ‘leisurely offices’. Upon moving into the new building, the head-director herself made it clear that the new office space was to be maintained tidily, and no personal belongings should be allowed in offices. A special inspection team was soon formed to make sure that the order was effectively executed. The real life of offices, to the contrary, is anything but tidy. Personal towels are hung on cabinet handles, cosmetics and toothbrushes are displayed on desks, film stars smile happily through posters stuck to the wall (picture 6 to 9). Many of my colleagues change into slippers the first thing they arrive in the office, and during the noon-break, they take out sleeping-chairs and have a nap on them in the office, although that practice, too, was forbidden by the head-director for fear of damaging the bureau's image. The inspection team does not come very regularly, and when it does come, one could always be sure to know it well in advance. It would be wrong to assume, however, that the head-director was all the while unaware of the blatant disobeys of her order, for almost every office in the building is donned up by its occupants in similar leisurely fashions.

![Picture 6](image6.png)  ![Picture 7](image7.png)

![Picture 8](image8.png)  ![Picture 9](image9.png)
To sum up, the spatial practice of the building is characterized by an ambiguity, for it embodies, with equal prevalence, two contradictory sets of behaviours with regard to hierarchical power. Such ambiguity is hard to reconcile without considering how the work space is experienced by its employees, to which we now turn.

Spatial experience – the interpreted space

It is natural that the hierarchical power, excessively displayed and rigidly practiced, should find itself the object of fear in employees’ spatial experiences, which is indeed the case in many occasions. Hierarchal power seems, at the first sight, a forbidden topic within the bureau. During the course of interviews, interviewees habitually lower their voice, or blur their ways through, when they come close to topics related to hierarchical power. One interviewee was asked about his personal opinion of the building’s appearance, and he says something like:

‘There are talks, you know… the character…that is… you know what I mean…’

What he was referring to is a wide-spread rumour (quoted below) which places the head-director in a rather unfavourable light. The cryptic way of his expression reminds one of Voldimore, the one-who-shall-not-be-named, in *Harry Porter*, and the comparison might not be inappropriate. Like the ever-present arch-devil, messages of hierarchical power are everywhere in spatial design, and are feared likewise.

On the other hand, hierarchical power is the preferred ingredient of work-time rumour, and the unfailing source of employees’ spatial imagination. The above mentioned story of the building’s appearance serves an example here. The official explanation of the building’s symbolic connotation, as shared by many members of the high management, tells that the building is designed to look after an ancient Chinese coin, a symbolism which is consistent with the functionality of the bureau as a government financial administration. Amongst themselves, however, employees cherish a different story. It is agreed that the building resembles a Chinese character, which happens to be the family name of the bureau’s ex head-director. The story then goes that either the ex-director personally saw to it before his retirement that his name was permanently inscribed in the bureau’s new sky-scraper, or, in
another version, that the present head-director was so indebted to her predecessor that she
turned the whole building into a huge memorial. The high management is well aware of the
existence of such stories, and they usually wave it aside, with a tolerant smile, as ‘sheer
nonsense’.

On close inspection, we notice that such stories arise because there is a different
interpretation of hierarchical power. Hierarchical power, as it is experienced by employees,
never purely refers to that which legitimized by, and therefore remunerative from, official
duties; rather, it carries with it an extra layer of meaning as ‘personal benefit’. The
assumption behind the story is that people in official positions are automatically and
simultaneously granted an amount of personal benefit, or the potentiality of such benefit,
which is commensurable with their positions. Directors are imagined to enjoy great personal
benefit – to have their names inscribed in the building, or to give the building away as a
personal gift – because they hold high official positions, and likewise, ordinary employees
moan over their personal sufferings and attribute them to their lack of hierarchical power.
This latter case is exemplified by the popular ‘ghost stories’ in the bureau. A certain corridor
of the building is rumoured to be haunted as people start to detect strange smells around it
(the culprit turns out to be a nearby sewerage-pipe). Since it is agreed that only unimportant
staff are allocated to corridors like that, stories of how that corridor brings bad luck to office
dwellers alongside it soon heaps on one another: a division chief was demoted despite of his
many years of service with the bureau, and an employee did not get on favourably with his
boss, and so on. In the end, family misfortunes are attributed to the corridor, as well as many
other corridors of the building which share the general character of being dimly-lit, and foul in
smell. One lady of the bureau unfortunately broke her leg; her father-in-law passed away with
heart disease, her neighbour had a car accident, and her daughter caught leukemia. These
are all because of, as one of my colleagues puts it, the lady’s office being situated in a
corridor that never catches any sunshine.

To sum up, employees’ experiences of their working space show that a double
interpretation of power. The same power is feared when it is interpreted as hierarchical
authority (power-as-hierarchical), and joked and rumoured about when interpreted as personal benefit (power-as-personal). It is a janus-faced creature, with one face facing the rigid, formal sphere of bureaucratic order, and the other the softer, informal one of subjective playfulness.

Discussion

A question now arises: is power-as-personal, (a) just an interpretation, shared only by low-rank employees of the bureau, or is it, (b) an intrinsic aspect of the power that is behind the everyday life of the entire bureau, directors or non-directors? This question is important because each answer would place the ‘leisurely office’ in a different light of explanation. With answer (a), for instance, we could simply explain away the ‘leisurely office’ as an instance of workplace resistance. This article opts for answer (b), and it arrives at this conclusion by examining the interplays between spatial planning, practice and experience as observed in the bureau.

The design of the building, we have noticed, abounds in messages of strict hierarchical differentiation. These messages, on the one hand, are materialized in spatial practices the same way the blueprint of a building is materialized in steel and glass: it lays out the frame for concrete behaviours. Thus, we observe employees place their bodies, speak, and follow superiors’ orders in lieu with these messages. The same messages, on the other hand, encourage employees to perceive, feel, and imagine – in short, to experience – their workspace in ways that are related to hierarchical power. The design of the building, we have also noticed, is exaggerated in the display of power messages. Such exaggeration should not be treated as mere coincidence. With regard to the design’s encouraging effect on spatial experiences, it looks more like an invitation, and, to note, not just any invitation. Let us deviate from academic writing for a moment: the invitation reads something like this. ‘Look, I would like to invite everyone that works in the building to experience her/his space following the power signs I have given; furthermore, I have made it clear that I am quite particular about these signs – look at the fire-escape and you will know – and so, if I appear
unconcerned or ‘neglectful’ about hierarchical power once in a while, better believe that is exactly what I intend to…’

Such moments of neglectfullness do occur: the head-director sees the leisurely offices but makes no more comments, and the inspection team is busy with formalities only. A rule is made (no more sleeping-chairs in the office!), defiance is detected, and no punishment is executed. With the invitation note already issued by spatial design, practices of space in effect inspires employees to think twice about the power messages they are given to read, and the natural result of reading would be: the bureau’s leniency on leisurely offices is a gift, a token of good-will, a gesture of the head-director’s personal favour. On the basis of this re-interpretation, employees’ spatial experience justifies their spatial behaviours: leisurely office becomes a prevalent and standardized practice of the bureau. The process of justification is something like a letter of appreciation sent back to the high-management. Employees acknowledge the gesture of the head-director’s personal favour, and in return, they will carry on the practice of sleeping-chairs while at the same time, work more overtime when needed and act more deferentially if necessary, for they understand, from their own experiences, that the head-director has her bosses’ personal favours to return (hence the interpretation of the building as a personal memorial), and the bureau is just a system within ever-larger systems of bureaucracy.

In the end, spatial practice and experience both reinforce the Janus-faced power spelt out in spatial design. Employees continue to talk about power, in offices, over lunch-table and in after-work activities. They play around the double meaning of power by addressing their superiors as ‘leader’, sincerely and jovially at the same time, and by rumouring about their superiors, fearfully and eagerly and the same time. Their everyday experiences with the organization have taught them the practical knowledge of survival in the building. They have earned their ‘leisurely offices’ by bowing their heads in front of the austerity of hierarchical power, and they know that servility and ‘leisure’ are both parts of the deal, a deal that has its draft in the design of the building in the first place. By practicing and experiencing hierarchical power in double ways employees of the bureau sign up for that deal.
To sum up, the interplays of spatial planning, practice and experience could be illustrated in the following graphic:

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Spatial
planning
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Spatial
practice
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Spatial
experience
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It must be added here that for analytical purpose the discussion so far has placed the interplays in a temporal sequence. The three moments of the triad are locked in a recycling circle, and to ask when the circle starts and ends would be similar to the age-old enquiry of whether chickens come first, or eggs. The power that gives birth to the space of the bureau is, *in itself*, double-natured, and consequently, the leisurely office must be viewed as a constituent in the negotiation process that such power enables and necessitates, and not as an act of resistance. And if I may venture a little further, the leisurely office in this particular organization testifies that power and resistance may not be conceptualized as engaged in dichotomous and antagonistic relations; instead, they both subject themselves to the higher synthesis of the negotiating process of ‘struggle’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The present article applies Lefebvre’s triad model in an effort to unravel the power relations that produce the space of a particular bureaucratic organization. It concludes that the bureaucratic power of the organization has dual rationality, defined as hierarchical authority on the one hand, and personal benefit on the other. The article further argues that
this double-natured bureaucratic power gives rise to the strange phenomenon of ‘leisurely office’ within the organization.

Admittedly, the findings of the article may not be generic, and for one thing, the Chinese culture, within which the organization is situated, necessarily plays a vital part in the forming of the double-natured bureaucratic power (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2004). Yet, if the argument of the article holds, it may invite us to re-visit the Weberian notion of bureaucratic power, firstly in the light of cultural differences, and secondly, by paying attention to the ‘soft’ side of the iron-cage, as some recent researches in organizations have already revealed (Courpasson, 2000).
References


