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Spatial Labour Control
Experiencing Labour Mobility in the Chinese/Asian Restaurant Industry in the United States

Tommy Wu

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

This article contributes to understanding the relationship between mobilities and labour control. Focusing on the expansion of the Chinese/Asian restaurant industry in the United States during the last two decades and drawing from a multi-sited, multi-scalar ethnography, the concept of spatial labour control is employed to explicate the various forms of labour control and the mechanisms that contribute to the autogenous reproduction of the industry's out-of-state work arrangement. Specifically, a spatial lens reveals paternalistic control over workers' food and housing, spatial control over workers' morals and affect, and control over workers' mobilities. Moreover, workers' constant relocation to new work destinations to combat social isolation and feelings of restlessness unintentionally reproduces the circulation of atomized labour for the industry. Such conditions are inconducive to collectively addressing labour discontent.

ARTICLE

Spatial Labour Control: Experiencing Labour Mobility in the Chinese/Asian Restaurant Industry in the United States

Tommy Wu, McMaster University

Abstract: This article contributes to understanding the relationship between mobilities and labour control. Focusing on the expansion of the Chinese/Asian restaurant industry in the United States during the last two decades and drawing from a multi-sited, multi-scalar ethnography, the concept of *spatial labour control* is employed to explicate the various forms of labour control and the mechanisms that contribute to the autogenous reproduction of the industry's out-of-state work arrangement. Specifically, a spatial lens reveals paternalistic control over workers' food and housing, spatial control over workers' morals and affect, and control over workers' mobilities. Moreover, workers' constant relocation to new work destinations to combat social isolation and feelings of restlessness unintentionally reproduces the circulation of atomized labour for the industry. Such conditions are inconducive to collectively addressing labour discontent.

Keywords: labour control, Chinese immigrants, food workers, mobilities, multi-sited ethnography, space, labour process

Résumé : Cet article contribue à comprendre la relation entre mobilités et contrôle du travail. En se concentrant sur l'expansion de l'industrie de la restauration sino-asiatique aux États-Unis au cours des deux dernières décennies et en s'appuyant sur une ethnographie multi-sites et multi-échelles, le concept de *contrôle spatial du travail* est utilisé pour expliquer les différentes formes de contrôle du travail et les mécanismes qui contribuent à la reproduction autogène des modalités de travail hors de l'État de l'industrie. Plus précisément, une perspective spatiale révèle un contrôle paternaliste sur la nourriture et le logement des travailleurs, un contrôle spatial sur la moralité et l'affect des travailleurs, ainsi qu'un contrôle sur la mobilité des travailleurs. De plus, la délocalisation constante des travailleurs vers de nouvelles destinations de travail pour lutter contre l'isolement social et les sentiments d'agitation reproduit involontairement la circulation d'une main-d'œuvre atomisée pour l'industrie. De telles conditions ne sont pas propices à une résolution collective du mécontentement du travail.

Mots clefs : contrôle du travail, immigrant·es chinois·es, travailleurs et travailleuses de l'alimentation, mobilités, ethnographie multisites, espace, procès de travail

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Jason is a 25-year-old Chinese immigrant who works as a sushi chef for Samurai, a 250-seat sushi and hibachi restaurant in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Three months ago, Jason drove more than 1,600 kilometres from New York City to work at Samurai. Today, though, Jason is restless. He reflects,

> I'm bored. There's nothing to do and I can't go anywhere. Even though I have a car, I don't feel like going anywhere on my day off. In New York [City], I would go hang out with my friends, we go eat, drink beer. But here's different, you don't have any friends. No one stays here long enough to become a good friend. I've been here only three months and I'm already considered a veteran. So many people have come and gone [shakes his head in pity].

Jason's move to his new job in Minneapolis spotlights the increasing need for Chinese restaurant workers to relocate from traditional immigrant gateway cities such as New York City and Los Angeles to new destinations in the United States. His reflection on this new work arrangement reveals feelings of being mobile across different places and yet experiencing social isolation and being stuck. These feelings point to the complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics between geographical mobility and labour immobility. By providing an ethnographic account of the experiences of Chinese immigrants as they are funnelled to work in destinations across the United States, this article expands the existing literature on mobility and labour control. Specifically, this article advances the concept of *spatial labour control* – the use of space to enhance control over the working body, in particular, to contain labour collectivity[1] – to reveal three core arguments: (1) that various forms of labour control that emerge from the new work arrangement of the Chinese/Asian fusion restaurant industry (hereafter referred to as the industry) to discipline workers are fundamentally spatial; (2) that workers' lives beyond the workplace and outside of work time are salient when examining the labour process; and (3) that ethnic and linguistic dimensions can mediate forms of spatial labour control, especially in industries that depend on new immigrant labour. Collectively, these findings illuminate the social effects on workers of increasingly mobile work.

The context for this study is provided by the proliferation of Chinese and Asian fusion restaurants in the United States since the 1990s.[2] The industry has grown exponentially, with estimates nearing 50,000 establishments prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, outnumbering the total number of McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger Kings combined.[3] Three important features characterize the growth of the industry. First, much of this expansion has occurred

1. Philip F. Kelly, "Spaces of Labour Control: Comparative Perspectives from Southeast Asia," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 27, 4 (2002): 395–411.

2. Asian fusion refers to a hybridized cuisine that includes dishes from more than one country (e.g. Japanese and Chinese, Japanese and Thai).

3. "Chinese Restaurant News," SBS Media, accessed 26 August 2022, http://www.s-b-s.net/jin_e/Contentlist.aspx?catid=515079890; Jennifer B. Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2008).

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outside of traditional large metropolitan regions such as New York and Los Angeles. Second, a significant portion of this expansion is supported by the growth of Asian fusion restaurants rather than traditional Chinese restaurants.[4] Because of a global trend toward fine dining, these new Asian fusion restaurants offering Japanese and other more haute cuisine can draw a higher-income clientele than traditional Chinese takeout restaurants.[5] Third, the geographical expansion of the industry has relied largely on the relocation of Chinese immigrants from gateway cities to destinations across the United States – a migration pattern similar to what scholars of Latinx immigration term "new destinations."[6] Within Chinese communities, this work arrangement, along with any jobs requiring workers to live and work away from New York City, is called "out-of-state" work (跑外州).

While a thorough historical review of Chinese immigrants in the industry is outside the scope of this article, it is important to highlight some important characteristics here. Historically, there have been several waves of Chinese-speaking immigrants who have provided labour for the restaurant industry. Most pertinent to this article is the arrival during the 1990s and early 2000s of hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Fuzhou, a metropolitan region in southern China.[7] Due to many socioeconomic factors in the Fuzhou region, a significant number of Fuzhounese immigrants paid tens of thousands of dollars to immigration smugglers, also known as snakeheads, to arrange for unauthorized journeys to the United States. Seen as the primary breadwinners and the ones meant to chart a prosperous future for extended family, men made up the majority of those who came to the US during that period. Some of them were teenagers, while others were in their 20s and 30s; many were husbands and fathers. While this migration wave has diminished significantly since the 2010s, the Fuzhounese who continue to follow this immigration path – as well as many descendants of the first wave of Fuzhounese immigrants who are now at working age – serve as the newest labour force of the industry. These workers fill all types of restaurant positions including cooks and chefs, waiters, cashiers, and dishwashers.

4. Tommy Wu, "The Resentful Foreigner: Racializing Chinese Workers in Asian Fusion Restaurants," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 22, 1 (2019): 59–78.

5. Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

6. Helen B. Marrow, "New Destinations and Immigrant Incorporation," *Perspectives on Politics* 3, 4 (2005): 781–799; Victor Zúñiga and Rubín Hernández-León, eds., *New Destinations: Mexican Immigration in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005); Douglas S. Massey, ed., *New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration* (New York; Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

7. Peter Kwong, *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor* (New York: New Press, 1997); Zai Liang and Wenzhen Ye, "From Fujian to New York: Understanding the New Chinese Immigration," in David Kyle and Rey Koslowski, eds., *Global Human Smuggling: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 187–215.

Why do many of these workers acquiesce to the mobility requirements of the out-of-state work arrangement? Some broader labour and economic dynamics suggest several factors. First, many of the Fuzhounese workers face linguistic barriers, precarious immigration status, and social and racial discrimination, which all contribute to the lack of mainstream labour market access. Second, many Fuzhounese immigrants rely on family ties and social networks for jobs, creating a niche labour market for the subethnic community. Third, because of the higher revenue stream of Asian fusion restaurants, employers can offer slightly higher wages to entice young immigrant workers to relocate. In 2019, a typical salary for a sushi chef in New York City was about $3,300 per month, whereas a sushi chef could earn $3,700 per month in a city like Minneapolis. While these socioeconomic dynamics can provide broader context to understanding the labour process in the industry, empirical data will illuminate key dynamics between labour control and mobility at the scale of everyday lived experiences.

These lived experiences are explored in the following four sections of the article, beginning with a review of the labour and mobilities literature to establish the usefulness of applying a spatial lens to the issue of labour control. The second section outlines the qualitative methodology used in this study. The third section reveals three forms of spatial control in the industry's new work arrangement: first, by drawing workers to jobs in peripheral locations with a paternalistic work structure that blurs the boundaries of home and work; second, by conditioning workers to become disciplined subjects through various signs and symbols in and near employment agencies; and third, by structuring both the navigation to job destinations and their mobility once there, leaving workers restless and socially isolated. The fourth section examines the psychological effects of spatial labour control on the workers. In concluding, I discuss how these spatial practices and arrangements benefit employers and help ensure the constant flow of atomized labour for this industry.

Labour, Space, and Mobilities

One of the earlier scholarly accounts on the labour process was the now-classic engagement between labour scholars Harry Braverman and Michael Burawoy.[8] Their contention centres on how the co-operation of labour is established in the production process. Whereas Braverman was concerned with division of labour and scientific management in the form of Taylorism as the mechanisms of labour control in factory work, Burawoy contended that any system of labour control, no matter how coercive, must have an economic

8. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review, 1974); Michael Burawoy, *The Politics of Production: Factory Regimes under Capitalism and Socialism* (New York: Verso Books, 1985).

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dimension (production of things), a political dimension (production of social relations), and an ideological dimension to frame and organize workers' lived experiences in the system. In simpler terms, and in the context of this study, one can conceive of the wage-distance correlation (economic), immigration status (political), and co-ethnic solidarity (ideological) as dimensions that shape how workers experience the out-of-state work arrangement.

In various ways, the Braverman-Burawoy engagement replicated many of the debates over structure and agency during the postmodern turn in social theory of the 1980s. Importantly, by incorporating "subjective" dimensions into labour process theory, Burawoy's extension of Braverman's work has, since the 1980s, opened the analysis of the labour process to a much wider range of issues, including immigration, gender, and local labour markets in shaping labour control. For example, both Ching Kwan Lee's and Leslie Salzinger's studies emphasized the role of gender in shaping labour regimes in new global factories; later, Carolina Bank Muñoz emphasized the role of gender, race, and the state in shaping factory regimes.[9] In studying women factory workers in China during the 2000s, Pun Ngai also observed other factors – including ethnicity, provincial/regional loyalty, nationalism, and consumerism – that helped explain why workers tolerated their working poor conditions.[10] Further, the shift from manufacturing to a service-oriented economy in the post-Fordist era has reaffirmed scholarly interest in emotions, the body, and other humanistic elements in the labour process.[11] While this scholarship provides valuable insights into mechanisms of the labour process, the empirical data in this article will demonstrate that the labour process of flexible work is also fundamentally spatial.

More recently, there has been renewed interest in exploring the relationship between mobilities and the labour process. Specifically, intensified flows of capital in the global political economy have necessitated the increasing movement of people across the world for temporary, seasonal, or permanent work. These dynamics have compelled scholars to define and clarify terminologies in characterizing the complexities of work-related mobilities. Cristiana Bastos, Andre Novoa, and Noel B. Salazar propose the concept of "mobile labour"

9. Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Carolina Bank Muñoz, *Transnational Tortillas: Race, Gender, and Shop-Floor Politics in Mexico and the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

10. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

11. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Miliann Kang, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender, and the Body in Beauty Service Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Eileen M. Otis, *Markets and Bodies: Women, Service, Work, and the Making of Inequality in China* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

as a catalyst to interrogate its various manifestations, including "movements *for* labour (migrant trajectories, economic-induced displacements), movements *as* labour (highly mobile jobs), and movements *of* labour (labour-related geographical dis-placement and its different rhythms)."[12] To be clear, while recognizing the interconnectedness of these three categorizations, this study focuses primarily on the everyday rhythms and patterns of movements of labour and examines how mobility of labour can be a key element of the labour process and contribute to the disciplining of labour.

Recent mobility studies have tended to be critical of the assumption that mobilities in the labour process are desirable given the propensity for time flexibility and earning potential (e.g., in the case of Uber and other platform-based workers). These scholars have spotlighted the exploitative nature of jobs that necessitate workers to become mobile. For example, Paoloa Jirón and Walter Alejandro Imilan found that the hyperflexible labour market of Santiago de Chile requires workers to weave through dispersed urban workplaces for their jobs, generating value for their companies but also leaving workers on their own to negotiate their time-space coordination.[13] Tom Vickers and colleagues developed three dynamics of precarity – surplus, rooted, and hyperflexible – to categorize the various forms of precarity in mobile labour.[14] Similarly, Linn Axelsson, Bo Malmberg, and Quan Zhang outlined the temporal precarity of Chinese chefs in Sweden, who are simultaneously disciplined by their work-time arrangement, waiting for immigration status, and waiting to realize their own imagined futures.[15] Collectively, these studies illuminate how mobilities of labour can exasperate socioeconomic inequalities.

Such troubling dynamics put into focus the spatial and temporal arrangements of mobilities of labour that shape workers' experiences. Labour geography has long emphasized the role of space in the organizational structures of labour.[16] A spatial approach allows for oscillation between various scales and places – a key feature that captures the movements of labour. Further, examining scales as diverse as the body, groups, and institutions enables consideration

12. Cristiana Bastos, Andre Novoa, and Noel B. Salazar, "Mobile Labour: An Introduction," *Mobilities* 16, 2 (April 2021): 155.

13. Paoloa Jirón and Walter Alejandro Imilan, "Embodying Flexibility: Experiencing Labour Flexibility through Urban Daily Mobility in Santiago de Chile," *Mobilities* 10, 1 (2015): 119–135.

14. Tom Vickers, John Clayton, Hilary Davison, Lucinda Hudson, Maria A Cañadas, Paul Biddle and Sara Lilley, "Dynamics of Precarity among 'New Migrants': Exploring the Worker–Capital Relation through Mobilities and Mobility Power," *Mobilities* 14, 5 (May 2019): 696–714.

15. Linn Axelsson, Bo Malmberg, and Quan Zhang, "On Waiting, Work-Time and Imagined Futures: Theorising Temporal Precariousness among Chinese Chefs in Sweden's Restaurant Industry," *Geoforum* 78 (January 2017): 169–178.

16. David Christopher Lier, "Places of Work, Scales of Organising: A Review of Labour Geography," *Geography Compass* 1, 4 (June, 2007): 814–833; Andrew Herod, *Labor Geographies: Workers and the Landscapes of Capitalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001).

https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2024v93.007

of both structural and agentive elements in the labour process,[17] thus providing an alternative to the dualistic framing of the Braverman-Burawoy contention. To be clear, this is not a critique of studies that focus exclusively on a singular structural or agentive aspect of work. Alex J. Wood's study of flexible scheduling as a structural mechanism of labour control is informative, for instance.[18] But focusing beyond any singular element of work, or on an isolated workplace, can better capture workers' lifeworld. As Gertrude Saxinger argues, workers' lives are dependent on the spatial triad of home, journey, and workplace to develop "rootedness along the way" and "meaningful sociality."[19] How workers get to work, their movements during work, and how they move after work are all interconnected in a way that shapes subjective experiences. Moreover, such subjective experiences offer insights into the ways in which workers contend with labour discontent. As Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard further elaborate, it is through the variations of spatial and temporal rearrangements that conceptions of the self derive meaning.[20]

While a rich literature on spatial analysis of the labour process exists, few studies have focused explicitly on labour control. Even more scant are studies that are concerned with unorganized labour.[21] One notable exception is Philip Kelly's comparative study of production line operators in Penang, Batam, and Cavite/Laguna, which illustrates how space was deployed to contain labour; specifically, various managerial and bureaucratic strategies at various scales were established to discourage workers from collectively confronting labour issues.[22] While the spatial strategies from Kelly's study may be geographically specific, a key notion that can be drawn from his work is the concept of *spatial labour control*, which denotes the spatialized mechanisms, arrangements, and practices that are inconducive to labour collectivity.

An example of spatial labour control comes from a recent study of the 2019 Uber drivers' strike in the District of Columbia, in which Katie J. Wells, Kafui Attoh, and Declan Cullen examine how Uber's algorithms shaped the spatial and temporal experiences of workers through socio-spatial atomization – a

17. Herod, *Labor Geographies*; Kelly, "Spaces of Labour Control."

18. Alex J. Wood, "Powerful Times: Flexible Discipline and Schedule Gifts at Work," *Work, Employment and Society* 32, 6 (August 2017): 1061–1077.

19. Gertrude Saxinger, "Rootedness along the Way: Meaningful Sociality in Petroleum and Mining Mobile Worker Camps," *Mobilities* 16, 2 (February 2021): 194–211.

20. Susan Halford and Pauline Leonard, "Place, Space and Time: Contextualizing Workplace Subjectivities," *Organization Studies* 27, 5 (May 2006): 664.

21. Ben Rogaly, "Spaces of Work and Everyday Life: Labour Geographies and the Agency of Unorganised Temporary Migrant Workers," *Geography Compass* 3, 6 (November 2009): 1975–1987.

22. Kelly, "Spaces of Labour Control."

key obstacle to labour organizing.[23] To be sure, Uber's spatial strategy had limited success, as workers reclaimed their agency at the airport by collectively turning off their Uber application and tricking the algorithm into offering higher pay rates. Still, such studies remain scarce, and there is much room to better understand how spatial-temporal strategies are mediated through different mechanisms and in different industries. Empirical findings in this study will illustrate that ethnic and linguistic dimensions can significantly mediate socio-spatial arrangements, which becomes particularly salient in "immigrant industries" in which employers and employees come from the same ethnic group and many are not proficient in English. Such dynamics raise issues of co-ethnic solidarity and language challenges that shape power dynamics between workers and bosses.

Methodology

Given the geographical expansion of the industry and the focus here on labour control through workers' lived experiences, this study adopted multi-sited ethnography as the primary methodology. Because mobility and movement are central features of the out-of-state work arrangement, a traditional ethnographic method that focuses on one particular site would have produced limited results. Instead, I used a multi-sited (restaurants, homes, bars, buses, etc.) approach to provide a more holistic picture of workers' lives under the out-of-state work arrangement.

Multi-sited ethnography is essential to better understand the circulation and dynamicity of the ways in which cultural meanings and subjects/subjectivities are produced.[24] The ethnographer in multi-sited research assumes a physical presence, following and moving with a particular group, with the explicit goal of drawing connections among sites that together make up a complex phenomenon of study. These connections allow the researcher to construct not only the lifeworlds of subjects in various situations but also characteristics of the system itself. In this case, an understanding of the system of labour control emerges alongside an exploration of everyday routines and the ways that Chinese migrant workers interpret various social phenomena they come across, as well as an interpretation of the framings and logics, both mundane and sensational, developed over the course of everyday life. This study is very much about how workers make sense of their conditions and how they act out what Javier Auyero calls "subjective dispositions."[25] That is to say, how these

23. Katie J. Wells, Kafui Attoh, and Declan Cullen, "'Just-in-Place' Labor: Driver Organizing in the Uber Workplace," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 53, 2 (August 2020): 315–331.

24. George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (October 1995): 95–117.

25. Javier Auyero, *Contentious Lives: Two Argentine Women, Two Protests, and the Quest for*

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workers feel and what they do at particular junctures are forged from their life stories and their social locations as racialized subjects, workers, immigrants, husbands, fathers, and sons. As such, I listened to workers' life stories and I accompanied them, with their consent, as they navigated between various sites to better understand the rhythms and temporalities of their everyday lives.

I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork using participant observations and interviews. During this fieldwork, I conducted 50 semi-structured and open-ended interviews; 35 of the interviews were with workers, and 15 were with employers. The workers tended to be younger, ranging in age from 18 to 45, while employers were between 30 and 50. Nine of the interviewees were women, and 41 were men. This is a fair representation of the gender makeup of this industry, as most of the workers who travel far for work self-identify as men. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for the polarizing gender distribution is that men are viewed as the extended family breadwinners and are expected to do what is necessary, including relocation for work, to ensure a prosperous future. In cases of male workers in this study who were married with children, their wives tended to stay in New York City with the extended family.

For this study, I selected three primary restaurants – Sapporo, Osaka, and Samurai – in suburbs of three different cities: Long Island, Buffalo, and Minneapolis, respectively. The three locations were selected to represent varying proximity to New York City, the central hub of the industry's labour supply. Sapporo is within an hour's drive of New York City and thus allows workers to commute daily to the restaurant from their homes in the city. Osaka, located in the border city of Buffalo, New York, is much farther away, making daily or weekly commutes infeasible. However, it is strategically situated along one of the private bus routes in the northeast region that serves the industry. Of the three restaurants, Samurai is the farthest from New York City, which makes even weekly commuting by car prohibitive. Unable to afford air travel, workers who move from New York to Minneapolis are thus more committed to staying with the restaurant.

During my stays at the three destinations, I lived in dormitory-style residences with workers. Depending on the size of the restaurant staff, workers lived either in rented apartments or in the basements of employers' own houses. My stays ranged from two weeks to three months. I also shared meals with workers at the restaurant. This arrangement allowed me to observe workers' lives outside of working hours – a critical aspect of understanding the effects of the out-of-state work arrangement.

Lastly, it is important to identify the positionality and power dynamics in ethnographic research. In this study, building rapport and establishing credibility with participants was challenging and time-consuming, but the process

Recognition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

was made easier by my positionality as a bilingual Chinese male researcher. Many of the initial meetings with research participants started with their asking questions about my background. In this process, participants became impressed that I am bilingual and have a doctoral degree – a dynamic that often led to more inviting and cordial conversations. This curiosity wore off quickly, however, and the building of rapport with participants reverted back to my capacity as a researcher to develop and nurture these relationships.

The process of building relationships with participants involves questions of power and epistemology in ethnographic research. First, I recognize that the researcher-participant relationship is inherently fraught with unequal power relations. In a study of the sex industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Kimberly Kay Hoang notes that, unlike her participants, she could always eject herself from the field, making it clear that while she was "a temporary insider," she would remain "forever an outsider."[26] The fact that a researcher can leave at any moment during fieldwork means that there is inherently an extractive nature to the ethnographic method. I do not have an answer to this conundrum, but one way to mitigate this unequal power relations is to never fully detach oneself from the research. This may involve ongoing participation in efforts to improve the working and life conditions of participants as well as efforts to dismantle the social structures that (re)produce these experiences.

On the issue of epistemology, I also recognize the tensions and contradictions associated with a researcher being an "ethnic insider."[27] Undeniably, conducting research as a "co-ethnic" provides many advantages, but we should not mistake this "insider" status as a premise for producing more representational knowledge of the community being studied. As Linda Trinh Vo suggests, we should move beyond this "insider versus outsider" framing and instead focus on "the multi-layered, shifting, and competing similarities and differences between native or insider researchers and their communities – a process that is shaped by simultaneous, ongoing negotiations."[28] My approach to this research is not to become the insider who can produce the most "authentic" knowledge, nor to become the detached outsider who can easily veer into reification and exoticization of participants, particularly with respect to those in disadvantaged communities. Instead, I aim to produce what Jessica Shannon Cobb and Kimberly Kay Hoang refer to as a "locally grounded stance" in which situated insights are provided by those who live them.[29]

26. Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 22.

27. Patricia Zavella, "Feminist Insider Dilemmas: Constructing Ethnic Identity with Chicana Informants," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, 3 (1993): 3.

28. Linda Trinh Vo, "Performing Ethnography in Asian American Communities: Beyond the Insider- versus-Outsider Perspective," in Martin Manalansan, ed., *Cultural Compass: Ethnographic Explorations of Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000): 19.

29. Jessica Shannon Cobb and Kimberly Kay Hoang, "Protagonist-Driven Urban Ethnography,"

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Techniques of Spatial Labour Control

In this article, three socio-spatial realms have been identified in out-of-state Chinese/Asian fusion restaurants that serve as disciplinary practices on workers: paternalistic control over workers' food and housing, spatial control of workers' affect/morals, and control over workers' geographical mobilities. These mechanisms are often mediated by ethnic and linguistic dimensions, and they coalesce to produce a system of dependency, self-discipline, and socio-spatial isolation.

Paternalistic control over food and housing

Central to the out-of-state work arrangement is the reconfiguration of employer-employee relations in the labour process; specifically, an arrangement is established in which food and shelter are provided by the co-ethnic employer. In most instances, three meals are provided daily to all full-time staff at the restaurant. Employers also provide out-of-state workers with living arrangements either in the basement of the owner's house if staff size is relatively small (typically fewer than four) or a dormitory-style set-up at a rented apartment or house for a larger number of staff. Indeed, as seen in interviews with workers, as well as in online chat groups for Chinese restaurant workers, food and shelter are key criteria that workers consider when deciding whether to accept a job.

Because food and shelter are important to workers, they are key points of contention. I lived in three different worker residences for periods ranging from two weeks to three months. For my first stay, I lived in a single detached duplex that was owned by Aaron, the owner of a family-run takeout restaurant at a university campus in Buffalo. It had five bedrooms but only one bathroom. During the course of several weeks, at least two workers moved in and out of the house without others knowing who they were; they were probably workers at another restaurant who had some kind of connection to Aaron. Most importantly, the condition of the bathroom was unsightly. Grime and residue had turned the white tub brown. The toilet was lined with urine and feces residue. My second stay, in the semi-basement of an owner's house in Saint Paul, Minnesota, had similar conditions. In the bedroom that I slept in, the four walls were tagged with graffiti and splattered with food colouring. The condition of the shared bathroom recalled that of my first residence: the shower stall and toilet were lined with soap grime and residue. My third stay was in a rented single detached duplex in Minneapolis. In addition to the unsanitary bathroom and general cleanliness issues, there was a leak in my bedroom, which was directly beneath the second-floor bathroom. The leakage created a hole the size of a penny in the ceiling, and mould began to grow around the area. The kitchen faucet also had a leak, requiring a bucket

City & Community 14, 4 (2015): 350.

inside the cabinet to catch the water. The collected wastewater would be left for weeks before it was emptied, leaving a persistent odour in the house.

When I raised my concerns about these conditions with others living in the house, the workers did not seem to think the issues warranted attention. Their common response was that they did not know how long they would stay in this house or in this town and therefore it would be meaningless to put effort toward fixing something that ultimately may not affect them. Some of the issues with workers' living arrangements can be attributed to neglectful landlords, but many issues could have been addressed by workers themselves. The fact that many go unaddressed reflects workers' willingness to acquiesce to unfavourable work and living conditions. When an issue does become unbearable, their solution is to relocate and find another job. The relocation tendency further reinforces the notion that their stays in any location are only temporary and therefore any job, in any location, serves as a connector to the next destination.

Employer-provided food and shelter is not a new employment practice in the Chinese-speaking sphere. During the last four decades of China's hyper-industrialization, millions of migrant workers have relocated to urban centres for factory work that often includes housing from employers.[30] This seemingly worker-friendly practice, however, has been questioned for its paternalistic intentions. In their study of migrant workers in garment factories in China, Pun Ngai and Chris Smith point to how the provision of "quality" living accommodations as a strategy for retention in effect also ensures a just-in-time labour system where workers are always available in the production process. For Ngai and Smith, the "dormitory labour regime" produces new spatial politics in which the work-residence is reconfigured for capital accumulation.[31] Similarly, the employer-provided food and housing in this study represents a new arena of control for employers. By absorbing the realm of food and shelter into the labour process, employers can now better regulate and control the entire social lives of workers.

This paternalistic arrangement provides two interrelated implications for understanding labour control. First, this arrangement discourages workers from being "overly demanding," compelling them to choose between having good employment or decent food and housing. In my interviews with workers, some would complain about bad workplace conditions or low wages, but because the food and housing were acceptable, they chose not to voice their complaints to the employer or to pursue alternative resolutions. Relatedly, this arrangement also enables employers to make ideological claims as workers' co-ethnic social protectors, in turn allowing them to push the boundaries of

30. Ngai, *Made in China*. See also Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle*.

31. Pun Ngai and Chris Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place: The Dormitory Labour Regime in Post-socialist China," *Work, Employment and Society* 21, 1 (March 2007): 27–45.

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acceptable labour practices. This is particularly salient in an industry in which many of the workers are newly arrived immigrants who face limited labour market options and rely on their co-ethnic employers to navigate their social lives in new destinations. Indeed, this appropriation of co-ethnic dependency would become more apparent in the following discussions.

Spatial control of morals and affect

While paternalistic control over food and housing produces dependency at the structural level, workers also experience moral and affective disciplining as they navigate to their new job destinations. Two of the most important sites in this journey are employment agencies that help Chinese workers find work and inter-city buses that transport workers to their new work destinations. Through cultural signs, symbols, and social interactions at these two sites, workers are morally and affectively trained to become disciplined subjects.

At employment agencies, environmental cues cultivate workers to become purposeful. At one employment agency in downtown Manhattan, the forest-green signs hanging on the fire escape are distinguishable only by their Chinese characters and phone numbers. To the untrained eye, the phone numbers listed on employment agency signs seem to be selected for easy recognition and memorization (e.g., 925-8888, 227-8888), but in fact these numbers have been carefully selected based on age-old superstitions. In Chinese culture, it is believed that the numeral 8 is the most fortuitous of all digits because the Mandarin pronunciation of the number (八, pronounced "ba") is similar to that of the word for fortune (發, pronounced "fa") . The numeral 8 is therefore incorporated into daily life as much as possible. The numeral 9 is also significant, as it is believed to bring longevity. The use of these meaningful digits in agency phone numbers signals to job-seekers that fortune is their ultimate purpose in the United States. This sense of becoming mobile is made urgent by ubiquitous symbols and signs telling workers they need to be purposeful.

Social interactions can also reinforce the need for workers to be purposeful. Inside one employment agency, the cage-like partition that separates the row of female agents from the incoming job-seekers resembles the kind that one would find in a pawnshop. The interactions between agents and patrons are brief, purposeful, and routine. Attached to the steel-bar window is a white-board covered with Post-it notes laid out in a grid-like pattern and organized in sections by the type of restaurant job being advertised (e.g., cook, assistant cook, cashier, delivery person). On each Post-it note is marked the job position, monthly pay, working hours, area code of the location, and, in some cases, whether the job requires income reporting for tax purposes. Job-seekers busily scan the job board while engaging in conversation with the agents, but they never seem to write anything down. No contracts, no brochures – a phone number is all they need to remember. The agents, who often speak some combination of Mandarin, Cantonese, and Fuzhounese, are busy juggling phone calls and walk-in job-seekers. Most of the phone calls are from the bosses of

restaurants outside of New York City, some from as far west as Minnesota and as far south as Florida. On one occasion, a Fuzhounese man in his twenties studies the whiteboard listings before walking up to the female Cantonese agent behind the window. He begins a conversation in Mandarin:

> "Do you have a position for a cook?"
> "Where do you want it?"
> "Do you have one locally?"
> "No, it's in Indiana and pays $2,600 [per month]."
> "Indiana?"
> "It's a twelve-hour bus ride. You can start right away."

The young man turns to his friend behind him and makes a lighthearted quip in Fuzhounese before turning back to the agent and asking, "Does it require status?" The agent answers: "No, of course not!" The young man's facial expression turns more serious. He steals several more glances at the whiteboard to buy more time for contemplation before exiting the premises and going into the agency next door.

What is signified in this social interaction is that workers who traverse these employment agencies must be mentally prepared to make quick decisions about job opportunities, as there will always be another person willing to take the position. In addition, some workers do not want to be seen as too demanding, and therefore, they avoid asking too many questions. Restaurant bosses are eager to fill vacant positions quickly, since being short-staffed means they must do the work themselves or find a relative or friend to temporarily fill in. They recognize the transience of the industry and know that workers rarely stay in a job for very long. Without having much to go on when hiring workers from employment agencies, bosses usually prefer those who seem the most eager. Short phone interviews are often conducted at the agency during which bosses and potential employees discuss working hours, expected tips, the volume of customers, and the number of days off a month. Both sides are expected to make a decision on whether to move forward to the next step of the hiring process, such as a trial employment period. The brevity of the interactions and the no-nonsense demeanour of the agents create an atmosphere in which workers are expected to be curt, decisive, and purposeful.

In addition to cultivating a sense of urgency and purpose, employment agencies can also become sites of moral training in which workers are socialized to look inward and be self-conscious regarding their actions. In an employment agency in Flushing, a satellite Chinatown in Queens, New York, a poster printed with a fable is prominently displayed on the wall. The story reads as follows:

> A cormorant [aquatic bird] catches a fish from the sea. The fish says, "If you're hungry, you can eat me. But you labour all day and you can only have a small piece, while your owner gets most of me. Your owner even tapered your throat with steel wires because he's afraid you'll eat all of the food – how cruel!" The cormorant contemplates and replies, "I'm not going to fall for your trickery. I may catch a lot of fish and eat little now but when winter comes and there is no more fish, my owner will still feed me and I won't starve to death."

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This fable serves as a prime example of how co-ethnic solidarity is manufactured.[32] Workers are encouraged to endure mistreatment by employers because employers, they are told, are the only ones who can help in times of desperation. The message is that as a Chinese immigrant worker, one should not expect assistance from anyone or any institution, including the state. The second moral of the story is that workers should prioritize long-term security over short-term gains. It compels workers to become more aware of their inclinations to take advantage of immediate gains and to better control these myopic tendencies. This lesson is particularly helpful for employers in the industry, because many struggle to retain workers when business is slow. Thus, this story instills in workers the idea that changing jobs to earn more money is short-sighted and ultimately self-destructive. In essence, new immigrants are socialized through co-ethnic dependency to adopt the appropriate approach to work in the United States.

Beneath the fable on the same poster, the guiding principles of the employer-employee relationship are explicitly spelled out:

Lesson 1: Employee loyalty is a long-term cultivation by the business.

Lesson 2: As an employee, don't think of taking part in the profits with your boss because they wouldn't ask you to share their losses.

Lesson 3: Be grateful to your previous company when switching jobs, for surely it has helped you to some extent.

Eighty percent of bosses suffer from stomach aches, mental strain, insomnia, depression and anxiety. Therefore, be good to your boss. Bosses are like trees, whereas employees are branches. No matter how intense competition is, no matter how tough the market is, no matter how tight finances are, bosses always stand strong, taking care of all the families under the tree. Be it a big or a small tree, it always provides shelter from wind and rain. Be it a good or a bad tree, it always provides a place to rest. When talking about responsibility, who takes the most of it? Prestige requires intense struggles; power requires the investor's entire fortune.

Loyalty, gratitude, and empathy toward their co-ethnic employers are three core principles that are explicitly stated to condition workers as to how they should mentally prepare for their work in the industry. Together, they serve to pre-empt situations such as workers resenting employers when business is doing well or disgruntled employees engaging in acts of sabotage. Importantly, the poster and its guiding principles can be seen as what Michael Burawoy calls the "ideological" dimension of a labour regime, in which workers are trained to empathize with (in this case, co-ethnic) employers, highlighting the mental and physical toll of being a boss.[33] It paints the boss as a heroic figure who endures "stomach aches, mental strain, insomnia, depression and

32. Peter Kwong, "Manufacturing Ethnicity," *Critique of Anthropology* 17, 2 (June 1997): 365–387.

33. Burawoy, *Politics of Production*.

anxiety" and acts as workers' social protector. It appropriates traditional values of sacrifice, responsibility, and caretaking. In addition, the message also serves as a warning to workers: without these hard-working and self-sacrificing patriarchal figures, everyone would starve and become homeless.

Structuring workers' mobility

The third aspect of the spatial labour control is authority over worker's spatial sensibilities and physical mobilities. From the time they are introduced to the out-of-state work arrangement to the time they spend in their new job destinations, workers learn quickly that they are mobile subjects, but their mobilities are highly structured and confined. For example, inside the Tsingtao Employment Agency, a ground-level storefront among the clusters of agencies that line East Broadway (the main commercial street in Manhattan's Chinatown), a narrow rectangular room is made even narrower by a steel cage-like partition that separates agents from job-seekers. Toward the back of the room is a separate employment agency with its own business name, phone numbers, and a few employment agents. Plastered in the centre of the left-hand wall are a New York City subway map and a map of the United States labelled neatly with handwritten area codes. Next to the maps is a large, laminated poster detailing the New York employment agency regulations, workers' rights, and the state's minimum wage. On the periphery of the wall are advertisements from various bus operators and international calling card companies. In visceral ways, this wall collage is emblematic of the life experiences of many Chinese immigrants. Their rights as workers are summarized on two posters that they may never read or understand owing to their limited English. Their spatial conception of the United States is defined not by history, weather, population density, or other characteristics of place but by three-digit area codes and proximity to New York City. For these workers, New York City is the centre of the world and they are in it. But they learn very quickly from the aesthetics, symbols, and decor of employment agencies that their time in this centre is limited and that their survival depends on their willingness to venture into the periphery and the unknown.

Workers' social lives in out-of-state destinations are also structured and confined. They are often limited by a lack of access to transportation and English proficiency required to navigate their new destinations. Aken, a waiter working in Buffalo, explains:

> Fuzhounese people in the US live simple and monotonous lives. We work and sleep, work and sleep, that's all we do. If you didn't come today, we would be sleeping. Only if you have a car and know how to navigate you can drive around and have fun. Also, you have to know English or else there's no point – watch some TV, go on the computer, our day off passes by real fast.

Aken's description of his day off is typical of those working in out-of-state restaurants. Their social life is organized around the restaurant's schedule. First, days off can only be taken at the beginning of the week (Monday

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to Wednesday), when business is relatively slow. More importantly, employers tend to hire just enough personnel to allow for one or two workers to be off at a time. Employers either hire part-timers or fill in themselves for full-time workers during their day off. This arrangement almost always ensures that workers spend their day off isolated and without an accessible mode of transportation.

I lived for three months with the restaurant staff of Ichiban in a rented house in Minneapolis. The full-time workers stayed in the second-floor bedrooms while the owners and I stayed in the two bedrooms on the ground floor. Living with the restaurant staff for an extended period allowed me to observe workers' daily routines. On their day off, the two waiters, David and Joey, would sleep until around noon to catch up on rest after their sleep-deprived week. They would then cook lunch with groceries they had purchased. On several occasions, I asked David why he does not eat at the nearby restaurants. He stated that he would not know what to order, since many foods are unfamiliar to him. During the afternoons, David and Joey would do laundry if needed. Otherwise, they would spend the entire afternoon watching television or playing online games on their smartphones and tablets, looking forward to the days when Ethan, one of the owners, was also off, as he had control of the company car. When their days off coincided, Ethan would drive David and Joey to the local supermarket to buy groceries or to the local gym for exercise. Outside of these occasional trips, though, David and Joey were often confined to the house because public transit was generally limited and the routes impractical for their needs.

Effects of Spatial Labour Control

While much can be said about the psychological and emotional effects of this work arrangement, a complete assessment is beyond the scope of this article. Still, there are troubling signs that some workers are not coping well. Young restaurant workers often find themselves socially isolated and unhappy with the out-of-state work arrangement; however, because their discontent cannot be directly linked to employers' practices or to the work itself, workers can only associate their unfavourable circumstances to life's misfortunes.

During one of the rare nights on which several workers and owners gather for a night of mah-jong and beer, Sky, the head chef at a Chinese restaurant in Buffalo, begins to share bits and pieces of his story. Sky's family had paid $60,000 for him to come to the United States in 2007. Unlike some of his more disciplined peers who have worked consistently to pay off their debt, Sky has worked for five years but still owes a significant amount. One explanation for his inability to pay off debt is that he has not yet fully accepted that restaurant life is his fate. Every time Sky reflects on his predicament, he becomes melancholic and restless.

I prefer to work. I don't like time off. For me, the worst part is having time to reflect. When you're busy cooking, you don't have time to reflect. Once you get off from work, you have time to reflect again. Every day is the same: get off work, shower, watch TV and sleep. You get up in the morning and it's the same routine, every day. … Nothing you can do about it. That's the way it is – can't have other expectations.

Sky's sombre reflection in the middle of what is supposed to be a relaxing and joyous occasion speaks to the anxieties that workers in out-of-state workplaces must contend with. Many young workers in out-of-state destinations go through this "existential crisis" during their time off. While some workers like Sky try to temporarily cope with socio-spatial isolation through self-pity and avoidance, others become restless and want to leave. On one hot summer day, David, a 23-year-old Chinese immigrant from northern China who came to work at a new noodle restaurant in Minneapolis a few months ago, is ecstatic to learn that he will get to leave the house and meet up with me. I have a car and can drive him wherever he wants to go. During the car ride, he becomes unusually quiet. After some prodding, he relents:

"I'm not well. I'm bored."
"What happened?"
"Nothing, I'm just not feeling right. I think I need to go back to Los Angeles."
"What are you going to do in LA?"
"I want to learn to drive, get a car, and get a job closer to LA."

David feels trapped without a car. He feels guilty about having to call me every week during his day off to check if I am available, but the alternative would be to stay in the house and play video games the whole day. He knows this is not good for him; he is young, and there is much for him to experience. David explains, "I came to the US to experience new things! In LA, I get to hang out with my friends and just relax. I've been here almost four months. People at my age, every few months of work, we need to relax for a month." He adds, "I always need a change of scenery after a few months. Some people don't take time off and they go crazy … They get depressed and start doing drugs."

Conclusion

Employing a spatial lens illuminates some key dynamics of what spatial labour control looks like for immigrant workers in the restaurant industry. Through examining the mobilities of labour in the out-of-state work arrangement of the industry, we find that the disciplining of workers operates through paternalistic control over their food and housing, a business infrastructure that conditions their affect and morals, and an isolating socio-spatial environment that leaves them melancholic and desperate for a new job destination. Whether it is co-ethnic dependency on food and shelter, false co-ethnic solidarity through moral training, or linguistic barriers at new destinations, all three spatial forms of labour control are mediated by ethnic or linguistic dimensions. This is not to say that all spatial forms of labour control operate

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through these two dimensions in immigrant industries, but rather that they should be seriously considered in other similar studies.

The findings in this article also illuminate several broader implications. First, the ways in which workers cope with their restlessness and melancholy contribute directly to the transient nature of the out-of-state work arrangement. Workers are constantly seeking to relocate to another work destination to break the monotony. One can conceive of relocation as a form of everyday resistance, as it not only expresses labour discontent but disrupts the functioning of the restaurant. However, these voices are often ignored by the employer and the state, and the disruptions are temporary, as positions can be filled by other unknowing workers seeking reprieve. Consequently, from a broader perspective, transience and the cycle of relocation are reinforcing an autogenous system of labour control, one in which employers can benefit from distance in a number of ways. Without extended periods of social contact, workers find it difficult to build meaningful relationships that are conducive to developing class consciousness. This void was made apparent during the rare social gatherings of workers, when there would always be chatter about discontent with employers. Workers also showed signs of empathy and solidarity with one another. Yet such employment dynamics ensure an atomized labour force across the sector. As Ngai and Smith contend, "The constant circulation of labour creates difficulty for labour organizing compared to situations in which labour is concentrated within definite social spaces. Constant circulation acts like high labour turnover, the unremitting dispatching of labour leadership, and thus favours the employer, as it removes the discontented and more vociferous workers from the workplace."[34] The constant turnover also normalizes the narrative within the industry that workers are "free" to leave if they find the work conditions unacceptable, thereby disassociating employers from any responsibility to address labour discontent. At the industry level, the cycle of relocation also enables employers to continue to seek new markets in new destinations knowing there will always be a stream of labour supply to support their business expansion.

At the conceptual level, several dynamics of labour control can be discerned that may be helpful for future studies. First, a spatial approach is useful in illuminating key dynamics of mobile labour. Second, contemporary labour control is established beyond the workplace to include various spaces at different scales. In homes, during transit, and in local neighbourhoods, these spaces interconnect to shape the disciplining of workers. As Hannah Elizabeth Martin suggests, workers' entire economic, social, and physical landscape must be considered to better capture contemporary forms of labour control.[35] In future studies of mobile labour, we can ask, what would labour control look

34. Ngai and Smith, "Putting Transnational Labour Process in Its Place," 42.

35. Hannah Elizabeth Martin, "Local Spaces of Labour Control or Platforms for Agency? The North East Durham Coalfield, 1820–1890," *Geoforum* 119 (February 2021): 72–82.

like in other industries if examined through a spatial lens? What other dimensions help mediate various forms of spatial labour control?

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