

**Workshop on Labour Geography**  
**“From Spaces of Work to Communities of Struggle”**

25 and 26 March 2017

City University of Hong Kong, Department of Asian and International Studies  
Göttingen University, Germany, Department of Sociology

Venue: P 4701, Level 4, Academic 1, City University of Hong Kong,

MTR (metro station) Kowloon Tong, Exit C, Tat Chee Avenue 183

25 March, 1 pm to 6 pm; 26 March, 9.30 am to 3 pm

**Contact numbers in case of someone gets lost, does not find venue, hotel or restaurant, or any emergency cases:**

Jörg Nowak, 00852 – 59 11 22 51

Lillian Lam, 00852 – 60 78 15 66

## **PROGRAM**

### **25 March Saturday**

1 pm Introduction by Organiser, Jörg Nowak, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong

#### **1.30 Keynote speech**

Kanchana Ruwanpura, Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, UK

“Militarized Capitalism? The Apparel Industry’s Role in Scripting a Post-War National Identity in Sri Lanka”

**Chair:** Jörg Nowak, City University of Hong Kong

2.30 Coffee break

#### **2.45 Panel 1**

Neethi P., School of Development, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India

“Privatization of Ports and Workers’ Spatial-Fix: The Case of Cochin Port, Kerala, India”

Peter Birke, SOFI Institute, Universität Göttingen, Germany

“Spaces of solidarity? Transnational migration, precarious workers, and the production of space”

**Chair:** Huang Yu, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

4.15 Coffee break

#### **4.30 Panel 2**

Nicole Mayer-Ahuja, SOFI and Department of Sociology, Göttingen University, Germany

“Spatial mobility, labour process, and the absence of struggle: IT work between Germany and India”

Roberto Vêras de Oliveira, Social Science Department, Federal University of Paraíba – UFPB, Brazil

“Historical and Spatial Dynamics of Labor in Northeast Brazil”

**Chair:** Sean Starrs, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong

6 pm – end of first day

**Common dinner** at 7.30 pm at Fung Shing Restaurant, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, European Asian Bank Building, 749 Nathan Road, MTR (metro) station Prince Edward, 1 minute walk from Exit C1

## **26 March Sunday**

### **9.30 am Panel 3**

Yunxue Deng, Department of Sociology, University of Hong Kong

“Space and Contagious Strikes: A Study on the Automobile Industry in Guangzhou”

Huang Yu, Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

“From ‘Labor Dividend’ to ‘Robot Dividend’: Technological Change and Labor Geography in Dongguan, China”

**Chair:** Toby Carroll, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong

10.45 Coffee break

### **11.00 Panel 4**

Pun Ngai, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong

“Spatial Politics: Production and Social Production of the Dormitory Labor Regime”

Chris K.C. Chan, Department of Applied Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong

Hui Xu, Institute of Sociology, Jena University, Germany and Sun-Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China

“Transformation of Labor Relations and Transnational Solidarity in China: the case study of Yue Yuan strike in 2014”

**Chair:** Peter Birke, Georg August-Universität Göttingen

12.15 Lunch break

### **13.45 Panel 5**

Timothy Kerswell, Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau

“Neoliberal Organizations produce Neoliberal Cooperatives: A Case Study of SEWA Rachaita”

Manjusha Nair, National University of Singapore

“The Struggle to be Visible: Challenging Informality in India’s Urban Peripheries”

**Chair:** Nicole Mayer-Ahuja, Georg August-Universität Göttingen

15.00 – End of workshop

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**Contact numbers in case of someone gets lost, does not find venue, hotel or restaurant, or any emergency cases:** Jörg Nowak, 00852 – 59 11 22 51; Lillian Lam, 00852 – 60 78 15 66

## **Infos and Organisation:**

### **How to get from the hotel to the venue:**

In general, where ever you walk in Hong Kong you will find signs in English that tell you where the next public transport station is, so it is really difficult to get lost.

Royal Plaza Hotel provides for a really close connection to the East Rail line station Mongkok East that is one stop away from Kowloon Tong where City University is. You only have to walk a few meters through the MOKO mall from Royal Plaza Hotel to the rail station. MOKO mall can be a bit confusing but has signs everywhere that indicate how to get to the hotel as well as to the rail line station. The hotel is also close to Prince Edward MTR station (5 minute walk) which is two stops to Kowloon Tong. Arriving in Kowloon Tong, you have to pass the Festival Walk Mall in order to get to City University. There are various signs in the mall that direct you to the university. Academic 1 is the first building that you reach from Festival Walk. If you enter the university through the tunnel from the Mall, you will arrive in front of the library entrance. Then go up the escalator and you are almost at the venue. We will also have some posters that show you the way.

### **Friday 24 March**

Pre-workshop get together on Friday 24 March, 7 pm at the Thai restaurant “Flaming pot” in 239 Fa Yuen Street (close to corner with Boundary street), and later at 9 or 10 pm at the bar “Bound” in 32 Boundary street (close to corner with Nathan Road).

There will be a pick up of the workshop speakers who are in Royal Plaza Hotel at 6.45 pm in the lobby. The restaurant is a five minute walk from the hotel. Follow Prince Edward Road West to the West (turn left if you leave the hotel at Prince Edward Road), and then go into the third street on your right (there is no street sign but a Pacific Coffee branch right at the corner). The restaurant is towards the end of Fa Yuen Street on the left side.

### **Saturday 25 March**

There will be a pick up of the workshop speakers who are in Royal Plaza Hotel at 10.30 am in the lobby, and then we will have lunch at Festival Walk Mall close to the university.

Evening: 7.30 pm at Fung Shing Restaurant, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, European Asian Bank Building, 749 Nathan Road, MTR (metro) station Prince Edward, 1 minute walk from Exit C1 – cross the street with the flyover and you are almost there ! The restaurant is a 5-7 minute walk from Royal Plaza Hotel. MTR Prince Edward is two stops from MTR Kowloon Tong close to City University.

### **Sunday 26 March**

Optional after the workshop: Walk through the Kowloon Walled City Park, Walk through diverse markets in Hong Kong, or Visit of the Hong Kong Park at Hong Kong Island. We will decide this by universal suffrage at the spot.

## **Abstracts**

### **Spaces of solidarity? Transnational migration, precarious workers, and the production of space**

**Dr. Peter Birke, SOFI Institute, Universität Göttingen, Germany**

The social composition of industrial work has become more and more fragmented, even in Northern Europe. Employers use precarisation, outsourcing and transnational migration to introduce a “race to the bottom” of working conditions and wages. But where and in which scales do workers resist? How and where is collective action performed? On which power resources are successful collective actions based? How could those protests and actions be connected within concepts of a “social movement unionism”?

This presentation discusses the introductory steps and preliminary ideas of a project that aims at analysing social conflicts and collective actions based on the transnational recruitment of segmented workforces. The project will follow the movements of capital and the movements of workers in four industries: shipyards, steelworks, construction sites, and the meat industry. By drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “production of space” (and especially the dimension of “contradictory spaces”), it will not only focus on the immediate process of production. Rather, (sub)urban landscapes in total, so my hypothesis, play a crucial role within the (re)-construction and diffusion of (trans-local and transnational) workers’ solidarity.

#### **Biographical Note**

Peter Birke worked as a printer between 1987 and 1997, studied History, Nordic Philology and Political Sciences in Hamburg and Copenhagen. Worked on (and was an activist in) workers’ struggles and their history, urban social movements and squatting. He has published more specifically on the global social movements after the 2009 financial and debt crisis. Birke is editor of the journal Social History Online <http://duepublico.uni-duisburg-essen.de/go/sozial.geschichte-online>. He works currently at the Sociological Research Institute Goettingen

## **Transformation of Labor Relations and Transnational Solidarity in China: the case study of Yue Yuan strike in 2014**

**Prof. Chris K.C. Chan, Department of Applied Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong**

**Hui Xu, Institute of Sociology, Jena University, Germany and Sun-Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China**

Research on transnational labor rights activism has stressed repeatedly the positive effects of transnationalization as it enhances the chances that the actors will reach their goals. This line of research has produced a huge variance of case studies describing and analyzing the new opportunities and multi-scalar strategies of activists, trade unions and workers to mobilize along global production networks. What is more, despite studies covering many production sites in Latin America and Asia, research on transnational labor activism in China is scarce, as under a system of “authoritarian state labor control regime”, linking up with allies outside China may create political sensitivity leaving wildcat strikes as the most viable strategy for workers to get their grievances met. And yet, Chinese labor relations have experienced a dramatic change in the recent years, including the transformation of labor disputes from individual to collective forms; demanding advances in social rights, e.g. social insurance instead of the mere application of existing labour law, and thus aiming at broader societal change. This paper explores to what extent the global advocacy network is able to play its role in supporting local organizing and enhancing workers' rights under this context by examining the case of Yue Yuan strike in the city of Dongguan in 2014. The authors point towards a different dynamic than the boomerang model of transnational activism claims, suggesting that the local agencies play a much more significant role, even under increasingly difficult conditions as the regime has been increasing its repressive strategies. Therewith, the article contributes to recent debates presenting alternative conceptualizations of transnational activism beyond the boomerang pattern.

### **Biographical Notes**

Chris King-chi Chan is Associate Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at City University of Hong Kong. He gained his PhD in sociology from University of Warwick in the UK in 2008. He has published widely on Chinese labour, including the book *The challenge of labour in China* (Routledge, 2010) and articles in journals such as *Development and Change*, *Community Development Journal*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *International Labor Review*, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* and *China Quarterly*.

Hui Xu is a PhD student in the Institute of Sociology at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena, Germany. His research topics include labor politics, social movement and global value chains. He is currently researching on industrial upgrading as well as social protection in the context of manufacturing, automation and robotization.

## **Space and Contagious Strikes: A Study on the Automobile Industry in Guangzhou**

**Yunxue Deng, Department of Sociology, University of Hong Kong**

Based on 12 months of ethnographic study, and in-depth interviews with auto workers, Deng found that strikes in the automobile industry are contagious, meaning a strike in one key automobile factory could quickly trigger dozens of copycat strikes in the same industrial zone in a short time period. The formation of strike waves is related to the work and life spaces in the automobile industry. Local governments in China, in order to attract foreign investment in the automobile industry, have constructed gigantic automobile industrial zones and collective dormitory zones, which led to the concentration of automobile factories and auto workers in several industrial zones. The geographical concentration of production and living spaces in the automobile industry nurtured dense cross-factory social networks among auto workers, which further contributed to the information flow and collective learning among them.

### **Biographical Note**

Yunxue Deng is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include migrant workers, labour protests, and trade unions in China. She is currently researching the trade union reform and protests of workers in the Chinese automobile industry.

## **Neoliberal Organizations produce Neoliberal Cooperatives: A Case Study of SEWA Rachaita**

**Prof. Timothy Kerswell, Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau**

The Self-Employed Women's Association is almost universally praised for its work in organizing women in India's informal sector, but has never been examined from a critical perspective. In this study, we critically assess the SEWA movement both in terms of its big picture strategy, and the grass roots of its movement. We find that the strategies and tactics employed by SEWA expose the Indian working class to significant imperialist intervention through donations by highly politicized groups which have given these groups significant leverage over the organization. Our study is based on in depth interviews with SEWA leaders and construction cooperative members undertaken in the summer of 2015. We will demonstrate that far from significantly improving the welfare of Indian working class women, SEWA's Rachaita Construction Cooperative leverages the social prestige of the SEWA organization, including amongst its members, to deliver pay and conditions which are poor even by capitalistic labour market standards. SEWA institutions contribute to a deradicalization of the Indian working class, as well as a deradicalization of Indian working women about gender politics.

### **Biographical Note**

Timothy Kerswell is Assistant Professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration at the University of Macau. His research interests include the political economy of the global division of labour, international class structure, labour and migration policy, trade unionism, and Marxist political thought. His articles have been published in *Monthly Review*, *The Journal of Labour and Society* and *Social Change* amongst others.

## **Spatial mobility, labour process, and the absence of struggle: IT work between Germany and India**

**Prof. Nicole Mayer-Ahuja, SOFI and Department of Sociology, Göttingen University, Germany**

How does spatial mobility (on a local, national, and transnational scale) interrelate with the organisation of labour on the shop-floor, and what are the implications for everyday solidarity, and open conflict, in the company and beyond? Drawing upon research on transnational project-work in Indo-German software companies, it will be argued that transnational mobility remains central (despite new means of virtual collaboration). Just like cross-country mobility, it prevents IT-workers from establishing local roots, and a collective identity at their place of work. Everyday mobility (between home and office) takes different shapes in Germany and India, influencing the labour process and the division of labour within transnational companies. While spatial mobility runs counter to establishing a basis for collective action among IT workers, struggles do emerge between them and other parts of the population, in IT-hubs like Bangalore.

### **Biographical Note**

Nicole Mayer-Ahuja is a professor of sociology at University of Goettingen and director of the Sociological Research Institute (SOFI). Her research focuses on work, labour, employment, and their regulation. She has published widely, for instance, on the making of precarious and informal labour in Germany and India, issues of labour control, and transnational work. This paper is mainly based on: „Everywhere is becoming the same?“ Regulating IT-work between India and Germany, New Delhi (Social Science Press)

## **The Struggle to be Visible: Challenging Informality in India's Urban Peripheries**

**Prof. Manjusha Nair, National University of Singapore**

Although the Indian state has not offered welfare and social rights to all of its citizens, a remarkable characteristic of its polity historically has been the ability of citizens to dissent in a democratic way. My talk based on my recent book *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India*, suggests that this democratic space has been slowly vanishing. *Undervalued Dissent* undertakes a study of two different informal workers' movements, one that started in 1977, and became a success, and the other movement that began in 1989 and continues without success. The workers in both movements had similar backgrounds, skills, demands, and strategies. In the book, I argue that the first movement succeeded because the workers contended within a labour regime that allowed space for democratic dissent, and the second movement failed because the workers contended within a widely altered labour regime following neoliberal reforms, where these spaces of democratic dissent were pre-empted. In my talk, I will focus on the trajectory of the second movement, between 1989 and 2016, to show how it came into being at a critical juncture when the Indian political economic organization shifted fundamentally to a market paradigm. Though the movement did not



succeed in securing its demand for labour rights, it continued to be resilient and was replacing some of the functions of the state in the subaltern urban spaces the workers' occupied. Thus, I argue that it originally was and became a city dwellers' movement for visibility and recognition.

### **Biographical Note**

Dr. Manjusha Nair is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, and the author of *Undervalued Dissent: Informal Workers' Politics in India* (SUNY Press, 2016). Her research has been at the intersection of political sociology and development, with a comparative focus on land and labour politics in India, China and South Africa.

### **Spatial Politics: Production and Social Production of the Dormitory Labor Regime**

**Prof. Pun Ngai, Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong**

Recent studies of the expansion of global capitalism often center on the role of capital in general or the process of financialization in particular; at best, they provide an analysis of the capital-state nexus in the neoliberal turn at a time when the global economy is rapidly restructuring itself. In the study of the spatial politics of capitalism, jumping scales are often said to be achieved by the privilege of global capital with the assistance of the state. Together, global capital and the state create multiple scales of contradiction, which often up the space for resistance. While the enigma of capital in today's capitalism is studied in detail, the dialectics of labor, if not displaced, is often taken as supplementary and undeveloped. Suffering from a Western-oriented view on the remaking of contemporary global capitalism and its incessant crisis based primarily on the function of capital, the contribution of the experiences of labor in the Third World to the shaping of the landscape of current capitalism has been seriously underplayed.

Drawing on ethnographic studies in the industrial towns and cities of China in the past decade, this contribution aims to bring "labor" and "class" back to the center of spatial politics of global capitalism. In conceptualizing the dormitory labor regime as a form of spatial politics of labour, we argue that labor and its class, and its relation to capital and the state is central to the making of global production space. This contribution highlights that class can be reactivated as a useful concept by rooting it in class experience from below, that is, in the everyday micro-politics of the dormitory labor regime, in which Chinese migrant workers are called upon to live out their own nuanced class experiences.

### **Biographical Note**

Pun Ngai is Professor at Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong. Her latest book publication is *Migrant Labour in China*, Polity Press (2016).

## **Privatization of Ports and Workers' Spatial-Fix: The Case of Cochin Port, Kerala, India**

**Dr. Neethi P, School of Development, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, India**

This paper is about recent experiences in the privatization of Cochin Port, one of India's premier ports, located in Kerala. Two aspects come to focus here: first, the port being conceived of as a 'place'; and second, the experience of a section of workers in this port and their responses to various concerns relating to their economic future. The experience of privatization of Cochin Port is meant to illustrate the importance of conceptualizing a port as a 'place', a perspective which allows us to understand it as an entity with spatial heterogeneity, as opposed to being homogeneous or even spaceless, that is, as just a point on a map. This in turn allows us to study the experiences of various actors in it.

In this paper, the spotlight is on a section of workers affiliated to private labour pools and engaged in lashing and unlash work (known as General Purpose Mazdoors, GPM), who were systematically laid off following the commencement of operations at a new, privately operated container terminal run by Dubai Ports World (DPW) in the vicinity. I analyse the various ways in which these workers were affected, together with their response strategies. This approach further allows an examination of specific locales in terms of their responses to globalizing trends. I disentangle the sense of 'place' that this set of workers had about the port.

### **Biographical Note**

Neethi P.'s research interests include globalization and labour, women's work, informal labour markets, everyday work politics, alternative labour movements, and other related themes in labour studies. Her work has been published in various Indian and international peer-reviewed journals including *Antipode*, *Development and Change*, *Economic and Political Weekly* and so on. She has also contributed chapters to edited volumes in this field. Her recent (January 2016) book titled *Globalization Lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective*, published under Oxford University Press, employed the 'labour geography' framework to understand certain contemporary episodes around the new forms of labour control, conflict, and response in Kerala, India.

## **Militarized Capitalism? The Apparel Industry's Role in Scripting a Post-War National Identity in Sri Lanka**

**Dr. Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh, UK**

The end of the thirty-year conflict in May 2009 ushered in a new era of development in Sri Lanka, in which the state framed the path to peace in terms of an economic development imperative. The apparel sector was in the forefront of these reconstruction and reconciliation efforts. In this paper, I tease out how that capital is imbricated in the Sri Lankan state's militarized nation building efforts, specifically through the creation of a nationalist

management ethos and practices in garment factory premises in post-war areas of Sri Lanka. The aim is to stimulate debate about post-war development practices and the critical role a military-capital alliance played in shaping Sri Lanka's post-war national identity – which, in a conflict-ridden world, is likely to have resonance elsewhere. I contend that it matters *how* this process of setting up factories and creating a workforce occurs is challenging or re-inscribing old power asymmetries and tensions. This intervention is relevant not only in Sri Lanka but also other countries emerging from war, authoritarian, or militarized settings.

### **Biographical Note**

Dr. Kanchana N. Ruwanpura is a Reader in Development Geography based at the Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh. She also serves as one of two directors at the Centre for South Asian Studies and is the Programme Director for the MSc in Environment and Development at her home institution. Her work covers the terrain of labour, feminism and conflict/post-conflict politics for South Asia and has published extensively in numerous publication outlets; she currently serves as an editor on *Gender, Place and Culture* and *Geoforum* and is a former Humboldt Research Fellow.

### **Historical and Spatial Dynamics of Labor in Northeast Brazil**

**Prof. Roberto Véras de Oliveira, Social Science Department, Federal University of Paraíba – UFPB, Brazil**

This paper aims to identify and analyze, from a historical and spatial perspective, the social dynamics of labor that have been established in Northeastern Brazil, taking into account especially the socioeconomic reconfiguration brought by the creation of the Superintendence for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE) in the late 1950s. The article is motivated by the resumption, over the last decade, of an agenda of large public-private projects in the country and in the region. We seek here, from a retrospective viewpoint, to improve the understanding of the current situation and its possibilities and tendencies regarding development patterns and the corresponding labor relations.

### **Biographical Note**

Roberto Veras holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of São Paulo - USP (2002). His studies focus on labor relations, informality, public employment policies, unionism, among other themes. He was First Secretary of the Brazilian Association of Labor Studies - ABET from 2009 to 2011. Among several books and articles published he highlights “Sindicalismo e democracia no Brasil: do novo sindicalismo ao sindicato cidadão” (“Unionism and Democracy in Brazil: From the New Unionism to the Citizen Unionism”). São Paulo: Annablume Editora, 2011. 394p.

## **From “Labor Dividend” to “Robot Dividend:” Technological Change and Labor Geography in Dongguan, China**

**Dr. Huang Yu (黄瑜), Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology**

China’s economy, like many economies in the industrialized West, has shown signs of slowdown since the 2008 great financial crisis. While the “labor dividend” once forged a robust economy, it has been increasingly recognized that the path of export-oriented, low-end, and labor-intensive production is no longer sustainable. As global capital continues to inflict the so-called strategies of “spatial fix” and “race to the bottom” by relocating investment to places of cheaper labor and looser regulations, it is urgent for Chinese manufacturers to upgrade from the “world’s factory” to “smart manufacturing.”

Mainstream economists tout industrial upgrade as innovation that entrepreneurs adopt to advance their competitive edge, but have largely ignored the role of workers in shaping technological change. Drawing on Andrew Herod’s insight on “labor geography” and Beverly Silver’s theory on the “structural” power of workers, this paper seeks to disentangle the complex relation between industrial upgrading and workers’ agency in the production of space of capitalism. While “labor shortage” and high turnover rates might epitomize workers’ increasing *marketplace* power, the rising labor costs ensued might jeopardize workers’ interests as employers are incentivized to use robots to replace human labor. In terms of workers’ *workplace* bargaining power, although under the condition of a state-led union incapable of representing workers, the potential of initiating large-scaled, well-organized resistance against deskilling might be small, but the increasing centralized automation system might offer operators more convenient venues of work stoppage.

As the country with the largest population in the world, China’s shift from an economy based on exploiting its “demographic dividend” to one based on possibly leveraging the upcoming “robotic dividend” will have a significant impact on the Chinese labor force. It is urgent for labor scholars to adopt a dialectic approach in understanding the dynamics between capital’s technological fixes and labor’s agency in structuring the industrial landscape.

### **Biographical Note**

Huang Yu is currently working on a project entitled “From ‘The Workshop of the World’ to ‘Intelligent Manufacturing’: Indigenous Innovation and Labor Politics in China’s Robotic Revolution,” which explores the dilemmas both capital and labor encounter in the technological upgrade. Her forthcoming paper will be published in a special issue called “*Labor Questions in the Contemporary Global South*” in the journal “*Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*.”