

Doing Chinese *Danwei* Study in America

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SRA2016-1

State-owned Industrial Firms and Subordinate Collective Enterprises

My hometown is Changchun, a large industrial city in Northeastern China and the home of the First Auto Works located. Established in 1956, FAW is the pioneer of the Chinese automobile industry. Since then the history of Changchun has been closely connected to the evolution of the FAW. As I grew up, I watched as the transformation of FAW changed the development path of Changchun and the lives of the people who lived in the city.

The changes in the FAW and Changchun reflected radical transformations in Chinese society. Under the industrial order established in the 1950s there was little labor mobility, while employment today is much less stable. Because of the lack of labor markets and the state's ideology of organizing the society, the old industrial *danwei* (workplace units) were not only economic entities, but also communities that had multifaceted institutional functions and cultural connotations. Large state-owned factories not only provided permanent employment, but also supplied housing, clinics, schools, and other basic amenities for their employees and families.

In the 1970s, under the normative pressures of the *danwei* system, many factories established subordinate collective enterprises in order to solve the unemployment of employees' family members and provide services for the *danwei* community. With the economic reforms that started in the 1990s, industrial firms have been transformed from *danwei* communities into profit-generating enterprises. One of the most traumatic aspects of this process—but one that has been little studied—has been the shedding of these collective enterprises, most of which have subsequently gone out of existence

I began studying the evolution of the *danwei* system after entering graduate school at Jilin University in Changchun. While doing research for my master's thesis, "*The Familization of State-owned Enterprises and the Duality of Danwei Organization—A Case Study of Factory Y in Planning System*", I became aware of the important role

of subordinate collective enterprises within industrial *danwei*. For my doctoral dissertation research, I decided to investigate how *danwei* communities have been dismantled, focusing on the fate of these collective enterprises, and the impact of this transformation on the social structure of urban China and the lives of work unit members.

Learning about *Danwei* Study in the United States

It is strange that although *danwei* is a unique form of organization in China, the most famous books about the *danwei* system are written by U.S. scholars. This made me wonder, is there any difference between the Chinese way and the western way of doing research? I decided that it would be very helpful to go to the United States to meet and work with some of the leading scholars who have studied and are studying the *danwei* system.

Although I was convinced that the transformation of the *danwei* system was of great historical importance, I was concerned that few scholars in China are investigating this history. Indeed, some Chinese scholars doubted whether it was important to study the collective enterprises that were so common in past decades, as most of them no longer existed. I was eager, therefore, to raise these questions with Professor Andrew Walder (Stanford University) and Professor Joel Andreas (Johns Hopkins University).

Professor Walder has written the most widely-cited book on the Chinese work unit system: *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* and he is deeply familiar with the transition period and processes I want to study. When asked about the practical significance of historical sociological study of the *danwei* system and collective enterprises built by industrial *danwei*, he said that social change was a very important part of sociology study, which changed the social structure. As in the Chinese case, though the collective enterprises only existed for a few decades, they fundamentally influenced the welfare system and China socialism. Sociological study would be too narrow if it ignored this. His interest in my topic of research gave me confidence and also let me know the value of doing this.

Professor Andreas is with high reputation in Chinese study, especially known for the remarkable book *Rise of the Red Engineers: the Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*. He highlighted the significance of studying the subordinated collective enterprise model and also helped me orient my path of research. Why were the subordinate collective enterprises built? What role did they play in the danwei system? Why did they go out of existence? What were the consequences? I now feel that I have a clearer sense of my research goals and how my research will help us understand the development and transformation of *danwei* communities and the consequent re-organization of China society..

Thanks to the Tokyo Foundation and the SRA award, I had a chance to spend one month at Stanford University as a visiting student. During my stay at Stanford, I spent most of my time in the Hoover Archives and the Hoover Library, which holds a huge amount of files, books, documents, records and articles about China and other former communist counties. When I looked at the original copies, I felt strongly that although I can obtain first-hand resources by interviews and fieldwork, when it comes to historical study, the lack of historical materials could be a loss. During my SRA program, in addition to meeting with Professor Andrew Walder I also met with Professor Zhou, Xueguang and Professor Ching-kwan Lee at University of California, Los Angeles. Professor Zhou's main area of research is institutional changes in contemporary Chinese society, focusing on Chinese organizations and management and Professor Lee is now working on Chinese organizations and labor practices. The discussions with experts gave me new perspectives of looking at my topic, and the advice they gave me helped me develop more logical ways of doing *danwei* research.

This experience has helped me re-orient my doctoral dissertation research and it has broadened my thinking about the Chinese *danwei* system in a worldwide perspective and background. When I finished my SRA program, I not only found that it is meaningful to do my research topic, but also found it is meaningful to come to the U.S. do *danwei* study. There is no doubt that the transformation of the *danwei* system fundamentally reshaped Chinese society, and was one of the defining features of the whole historic transition.