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‘Leader, you first’: The everyday production of hierarchical space in a Chinese bureaucracy

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Abstract
Recent studies highlight how organizational power relations are materialized in space. However, relatively little is known about how these spatialized power relations are reproduced on a day-to-day basis. Drawing on a ten-month ethnographic study of a large government office in China, we find that hierarchical space is produced through three intertwined processes. It proliferates as employees actively seek out signs of hierarchy in the organization’s space; it becomes familiarized as employees fabricate and circulate fanciful narratives about their spatial environs; and it is ritualized by employees acting out hierarchical relations across the organization’s space. These processes resulted in a hardening of the hierarchical relations of power. The study extends the existing literature by showing how hierarchical organizational space is not just something that is imposed on employees; it is also imposed by the employees themselves.

Keywords
bureaucratic hierarchy, China, everyday lives, Lefebvre, organizational space

Introduction

Researchers have long recognized that physical space affects organizational processes such as motivation, productivity and knowledge sharing. However, it is only recently that a body of research has emerged that systematically studies the impact of space on organizational processes (Taylor and Spicer, 2007). One of the central findings in this

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stream of research is that architecture, room decor and office layout materialize organizational power relations (Dale and Burrell, 2008; Hernes, 2004; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004). For instance, the layout of institutions, such as prisons, bolsters the power of guards and reduces that of prisoners (Foucault, 1977). Similarly, large offices with impressive views tend to reinforce the power of the organization's managers (Baldry, 1999).

Some studies have proposed that design is not determinate. A particular form of architecture does not map onto a particular set of power relations in a neat, one-to-one fashion. This is because organizational space is constantly produced through the everyday ways it is lived within (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Wapshott and Mallett, 2012). Often, ways of occupying, experiencing and using space can reconfigure spatial power relations in surprising ways not intended by the space's designers (Halford, 2004; Hurdley, 2010; Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Much of this literature focuses on the ways quotidian activities can undermine or resist dominant power relations. However, we know less about how these daily spatial practices actually bolster and reinforce the dominant power relations in an organization. To address this, we examine how social space is produced in everyday organizational lives and how this reproduces dominant power relations.

Drawing on a ten-month ethnographic study conducted in a Chinese government organization, which we call 'the Bureau', we trace the everyday production of hierarchical space. We reveal three intertwined processes. Bureaucratic hierarchy was proliferated when employees sought out signs of hierarchy in multiple aspects of the Bureau's space; it was familiarized when employees circulated fanciful narratives about the hierarchical nature of the space; and bureaucratic hierarchy was also ritualized by employees acting out hierarchy within, as well as outside, the organization. In these episodes in the Bureau's everyday life, we found that employees cynically questioned hierarchy, but at the same time constructed a physical lifeworld of all-encompassing hierarchy.

To support our argument, we proceed as follows. We begin by examining existing studies of organizational space. We then outline the methods used for this study and present our findings in the form of three processes of the production of hierarchical space. We discuss how these processes facilitate our understanding of the everyday production of social space in organizations. The article concludes with a discussion of its contributions and limitations, and some lessons for future research.

Literature review

Conceptualizing organizational space

Although research has established space as an important dimension of organizations, space can be conceptualized in different ways. One useful framework regards the literature as underpinned by three concepts of space (Taylor and Spicer, 2007). The first conceptualizes space as distance, founded on the Euclidian understanding of space as the physical distance between two or more points. Studies of organizational space following this approach mainly map out distance and proximity in the organization. These data can be aggregated on diagrams or maps that can then be utilized to examine the behavioural and ergonomic implications of organizational space (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007; Hall and

Hall, 1975; Wineman, 1982), such as how seating arrangements, physical barriers and location of office facilities encourage certain patterns of behaviours and social interactions in organizations (Allen, 1977; Arge and De Paoli, 2000; Becker, 1981; Bitner, 1992; Brookes and Kaplan, 1972; Duffy, 1997; Hatch, 1987; Grajewski, 1993; Parsons, 1972; Sundstrom and Sundstrom, 1986).

Accounts of space as distance reveal that spatial materiality can have profound effects on a range of organizational processes. However, a strict focus on distance is mostly inadequate to explain why and how organizational members interpret their spatial environs (Canter, 1983; Hatch, 1990). This has given rise to a second approach that examines organizational space as lived experiences. This line is based on the phenomenological proposition that space must be animated with subjective meanings before it can be said to have any behavioural implication (Bachelard, 1969; Casey, 1998; Tuan, 1977). From this perspective, corporate architecture, office layout and displayed artefacts express symbolic meanings (Gagliardi, 1990), impart aesthetic experiences (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000) and embody managerial narratives (Yanow, 1998). Importantly, research suggests that users' subjective experience of space, whether symbolic or aesthetic, can differ hugely from the intentions of space designers. Users approach space through their life histories, cultural heritages, and professional and gender backgrounds; thus, organizational space remains open to multiple interpretations and experiences (Cairns et al., 2003; Daskalaki et al., 2008; Dobers and Strannegård, 2004; Ford and Harding, 2004; Halford, 2004; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999; Rusted, 1990; Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010; Yanow, 1995, 1998).

Studying space as lived experiences provides some vital insights. It reminds us that users play active roles in producing spatial meanings; furthermore, these meanings are often so varied that patterned-out distance cannot be said to have general behavioural implications. However, as organizations increasingly come to be seen as political arenas (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Brown, 2007; Clegg, 1989; Clegg et al., 2006), there is a need to ask how spatial behaviours and experiences are implicated in the reproduction of power relations in organizations.

The third approach addresses this aspect and examines organizational space as the materialization of power relations (Dale, 2005). It is inspired by classic works in sociology and human geography that reveal how domestic, urban and work space (Bourdieu, 1973; Foucault, 1977; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1991) are the 'medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced' (Gregory and Urry, 1985: 3). Following this approach, architectural space (Dovey, 1999; Kersten and Gilardi, 2003), workplace layout (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992) and office environs (Baldry, 1999) are presented as central to establishing and maintaining power relations in organizations. It is this third, 'social' approach that we want to build on. To do so, we first look deeper at the roots of this approach that lie in the work of Henri Lefebvre.

Organizational space and power relations

Perhaps the most important statement related to how power relations are materialized in space is contained in the French thinker Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* (1991). This work has been a major inspiration for studies of organizational space (Beyes

and Michels, 2011; Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Dale, 2005; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Ford and Harding, 2004; Hernes, 2004; Spicer, 2006; Taylor and Spicer, 2007; Wapshott and Mallett, 2012; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011; Watkins, 2005; Zhang et al., 2008). Lefebvre's (1991: 37) spatial thinking hinges on a crucial move 'from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*' (emphasis in original). Lefebvre (1991: 33, 39) proposed a heuristic triad to capture how space is linked intimately with power relations. Space is at once *conceived* by the planners who order space in mathematical ways and, in so doing, dominate societies with the ideology of scientific thinking; space is *lived* by space users who seek to 'change and appropriate' the imposed conceived space through 'clandestine or underground' experiences, often artistic imaginations; and space is *practised* by both planners and users in their respective daily routines, which maintain and consolidate space's social 'competence and performance'. Thus, social space is a contested terrain that is constantly formed and reformed as social actors negotiate power relations. Lefebvre (1991: 116) believed that the (re)formation of power-laden space could be explored by mapping the 'interrelations' and 'links' among the conceived, lived and practised moments of spatial production in a given context.

Lefebvre highlights that social space embodies and dissimulates power relations, but he recognizes also that social space cannot consolidate power relations without simultaneously being torn open in renewed processes of spatial production. For him, social space is essentially an unfinished and unfinishable project. Central to Lefebvre's spatial thinking, then, is the notion that our understandings of space as a power entity cannot be separated from our understandings of space as something that is contested. Throughout his career, Lefebvre searched for that 'irreducible remainder' that redeems space from being a mere power-ossifying object (Zhang and Beyes, 2012). For instance, he was fascinated by the mysteries of everyday lives that generate alternatives from the quotidian (Lefebvre, 2008); he also emphasized body (Lefebvre, 1991) and life rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) as capable of creating novel space that sidesteps relations of domination.

Building on Lefebvre, Dale and Burrell (2008) examine how office buildings are produced by the socio-cultural forces in which organizations are situated and, in turn, how they produce power relations in organizational lives. These authors outline three dynamics in this process. These dynamics broadly mirror Lefebvre's analytical triad. First, space emplaces by assigning organizational members to different places. For instance, office layout categorizes employees into social groups, such as the boss and the secretary (Martin, 2003); it also facilitates managerial surveillance over the work process (Baldry, 1999). In hospitals, the ways that inpatients are accommodated in wards reflects what is socially defined as abnormal (Prior, 1995). In schools, teachers and students are assigned different territories to materialize culturally sanctioned forms of civility (Muetzelfeldt, 2006). Second, space enchants people with encoded meanings. Government organizations seek to overthrow stereotypical images of bureaucracy by being accommodated in modest-looking, medium-height buildings (Beer, 2007). Often, organizational space solicits experiences that reinforce dominant power relations at work; for instance, those of hierarchy (Rosen et al., 1990) and gender (Hancock and Tyler, 2007). Experiences such as vigour (Hancock, 2006), serenity (Carter and Jackson, 2000; Martin, 2002), career progression (Berg and Kreiner, 1990) and emotional

detachment (Witkin, 1990) can be designed into space. Third, space enacts: it prescribes certain patterns of mobility in the workplace. Many organizations use an open-office design to reduce communication barriers (Edenius and Yakhlef, 2007). Kornberger and Clegg (2004) suggest that some space, such as vaguely defined boundaries and empty halls, generates new power relations in organizations because it lacks prescriptive enactments.

Dale and Burrell (2008) provide a useful framework for understanding how organizational space produces power relations and how it is itself produced by macro sociocultural forces. They note that everyday lives are neither determined by, nor are spontaneous in resisting the kind of power relations laid out in architectural designs. However, they offer no further explanation for how this occurs. This is an important omission since recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that micro activities and everyday life are crucial mechanisms through which the social space, and the power relations it embodies, is remade. In a theoretical work, Wapshott and Mallett (2012: 70) outline how organizational members create spatial configurations to dictate certain behaviours, but also appropriate laid-out space by using and experiencing it outside its 'normal meanings or functions'. In a more radical move, Beyes and Steyaert (2012: 51) highlight 'molecular' forms of social space – bodily movements, successions of action, space users' affects – as central to the 'generative and overflowing movements that produce [social] space' in organizations.

Empirical work has echoed the importance of day-to-day activities in the reproduction of social space. For instance, junior clerks typically approached organizations as here-and-now places, they perceived space differently from managers who adopted a god-like view of space (Ford and Harding, 2004). Medical staff in UK hospitals drew on a series of local stories to make their workspace meaningful, and through these stories they resisted managerially imposed changes (Halford and Leonard, 2006). Female university clerks carefully manipulated their movements, posture and comportment in order to make their gender-neutral office space clearly gendered (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). Another study found that the professor–student hierarchy laid out in university buildings was 'made partial, ambiguous and contingent by the walking bodies of students' (Hurdley, 2010: 59). To contest managerially introduced 'hot-desking' strategies, employees restored workplace communities by sticking to their habitual desks and putting passwords on adjacent computer stations (Halford, 2004; Warren, 2006). Sometimes, designed spatial features were altered so radically in everyday uses that they left visible traces of power confrontations (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). Zhang et al. (2008) speculate that the development of resistance in organizations is accompanied by the expansion of resisters' space. Each of these studies highlights how new forms of social space are constructed in everyday lives.

This emerging strand of research makes an important contribution by highlighting the role of day-to-day experiences and practices in the construction of social space. However, in so doing it tends to emphasize everyday life as the basis from which employees carve out freedom and autonomy for themselves, within an otherwise space of domination. These micro-approaches largely assume that employees' quotidian engagement with organizational space can be viewed as a subtle form of resistance that undermines or sidesteps the dominant social space in the organization. But what if we problematize this

assumption (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011)? Could the social space produced in everyday lives actually bolster the relations of domination designed into organizational space? And how might this happen?

To explore these questions we draw on an ethnographic study of a Chinese government office. We investigate the interrelations among the conceived, lived and practised moments of the organization's spatial production. Lefebvre's spatial triad is frequently quoted in empirical work (Peltonen, 2011; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011; Watkins, 2005), but few efforts have been made to reach the inner dynamics of this triad. Also, while much has been revealed about the economic (Mann, 1987), political (Ma, 1990) and social (Björkman and Kock, 1995) features of Chinese bureaucracy, relatively little is known about the everyday lives within it – perhaps because Chinese bureaux are difficult to access. We hope that this study also contributes a methodologically inspiring and empirically rich case.

Methods

From September 2005 to July 2006, the first author conducted an ethnographic study in the headquarters office (the 'Bureau') of a large tax authority in a coastal metropolis in eastern China. The study focused on the Bureau's new office space: a 28 storey building that was put into use in 2002. The building is an appropriate site for our study. It was designed and constructed *ab origine* and, thus, facilitates observations of the emergence of social space. Also, the Bureau presents an extreme case of hierarchical power and, thus, facilitates theory building on social space (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The researcher had been a full-time employee in the Bureau from 2000 to 2003. By courtesy of his former colleagues, he was granted otherwise rare research access to the organization. During the field work, the researcher was assigned to a temporary job in his former work unit. By acting as project liaison, he had the opportunity to contact and visit many other units in the Bureau, including directors' offices. The researcher spent at least three working days a week at the Bureau. Using 'active participation' (Adler and Adler, 1987; Angrosino, 2005), he took part in the Bureau's various activities, from work duties to informal gatherings.

Typical of civil servants in China, the Bureau's employees tended to distrust outsiders. They feared that disclosing feelings and information to indiscreet strangers would endanger their careers. The researcher's previous employment in the Bureau meant he was on familiar terms with most of the employees he interviewed; nevertheless, he used a number of techniques to reduce possible unease. Following Tedlock (1991), the researcher maintained his participant role as one of a discreet, but disinterested inside member, who had no conflicts of interests with the participants (he made clear to them that he had resigned from his job at the Bureau), who had obtained managerial approval for the research (in the interviews he presented a letter signed by a deputy-director), and who guaranteed participants' anonymity. The researcher sensed he had gained participants' confidence when some participants claimed in interviews that they had discussed taboo topics such as their opinions of the Bureau's leaders.[1]

In order to provide a reflexive and faithful account of the Bureau's reality, the researcher adopted Pollner's (1991) method of self-questioning. He debated with himself

Table 1. Methods of data collection.

Data	Methods
Conceived space	*Observation* of the Bureau's spatial designs. The researcher took photos to capture the building's spatial configurations (Buchanan, 2001). *Semi-structured interview* with space planners, i.e. staff involved in architectural planning, internal decoration, room allocation and purchasing office furniture. *Documentary files* related to the building's planning (Peräkylä, 2005).
Lived space	*Unstructured interviews* with space users. The researcher allowed interviewees to develop topics that interested them (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002), acting most of the time as an empathetic listener (Mason, 2002). *Narratives* grounded in participants' life histories and subjective understandings of the Bureau's space (Gabriel, 2000). *Visual method*. The researcher asked some participants to take photos of the aspects of the building about which they 'felt strongly' (Warren, 2008).
Practiced space	*Ethnographic observation* of the ways that space users routinely engaged with the Bureau's space. The researcher was able to listen in to employees' daily conversations (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005). He actively engaged employees in casual chats in order to come to grips with employees' explanations of their actions (Van Maanen, 2011). Thick description diaries (Geertz, 2005) were composed based on notes.

and laid out possible ways of explaining what happened in the field, which he tested in daily conversations with the participants. This method proved useful for suspending the researcher's presumptions about the Bureau's reality that were hangovers from his previous employment. Following Alvesson's (2003) advice, the researcher used a combination of qualitative methods to contextualize ethnographic observations within the mutual efforts of the participants and the researcher in the construction of the Bureau's reality. He used the following methods to collect data on the three moments of the Bureau's spatial production (Table 1).

The field study yielded eight semi-structured interviews with space planners (two directors, one unit-chief, three clerks) and 57 unstructured interviews with space users (three directors, eight unit-chiefs, 34 clerks, five auxiliary personnel). The interviews ranged from 30 to 150 minutes in length. The study produced 143 diaries – most written in English – and 28 sets of photographs taken by participants.

The researcher manually transcribed all the interviews in Chinese. Transcription and initial data analysis began shortly after the study started (Silverman, 2001). Interview transcripts and diaries were coded and recoded using computer software NVIVO (version 7.0). Initially data sets were classified into three groups based on the key analytical categories identified by Lefebvre (1991): spatial design, spatial practice and spatial experience. These data were coded within categories to produce themes particular to each category. For instance, in spatial design, the emerging codes were those of power relations (e.g. hierarchy, patriarchy) and relevant ways of expressing power relations (e.g. aesthetic, symbolic). These themes were then coded between categories in order, through the interrelations of spatial moments, to produce processes of spatial production.

For instance, the process of 'proliferation' emerged in three intra-category codes: 'symbolic encoding', 'symbolic decoding' and 'symbolic creation'. Photographic images, taken either by the participants or the researcher, were treated as 'social artefacts' and 'decodable' sources of information about those who made and consume them (Heisley and Levy, 1991: 259). Photos can be read as semiotic text capable of communicating their authors' verbal intentions (Hancock, 2006), but it is important to note that they also contain fleeting and 'unsayable' moments of experience (Warren, 2008). To engage these moments, the researcher asked participants to 'read' the photos they had taken, to recall their experience of photo-taking. Participants' narratives were coded and emerging themes were alluded to in subsequent interviews, to be further developed by the authors. We selected for presentation three of these photos that captured employees' typical spatial experience. Additionally, two photos taken by the researcher are presented to illustrate his own reading of the Bureau's social space.

When presenting the data, the researcher translated related interview transcripts into English. He consulted some participants to minimize loss of semiotic nuances in translation. From the field diaries and interviews, we constructed a number of 'confessional stories' (Van Maanen, 1988) based on evocative events and particularly telling experiences at the Bureau. We winnowed down these stories to a manageable set of inter-category codes ('proliferation', 'familiarization' and 'ritualization'), which we think exemplify the processes of the Bureau's spatial production.

Findings

Proliferation of hierarchy

A 'landmark in government office design' is how an archived document (hereafter referred to as the *Design Note*) described the Bureau's new building. This commendation was partly justified by the pleasant ways that symbols of hierarchy were blended into the building's appearance. The entire infrastructure was situated on an artificial square set about two metres above pavement level, thus creating a visible gap between the prestige of government and 'lower' civic lives. The building rises 140 metres above the ground and, thus, is impressively vertical and dominates the skyline of neighbouring areas. The two main facets of the building slope slightly inward as they rise, giving the architecture an irregular trapezoid contour similar to that of an Aztec pyramid (Figure 1). This design was described as 'inviting a spirit of ongoing self-improvement' (*Design Note*). The building's foundation, height and shape carry significations of hierarchy.

At the time of the research, the Bureau employed about 300 civil servants and 100 auxiliary workers. Civil servants are ranked on a scale of eight titles.[2] For brevity, we refer to them here as directors, unit-chiefs and clerks. Auxiliary workers had no official rankings. This hierarchy was articulated by the building's internal layout in a number of ways. First, it was specified by the location of employees' offices. Lower floors were occupied by auxiliary workers. The top floors (22, 23 and 24) – the ultimate destinations for 'ongoing self-improvement' – housed the directors' personal suites. A common saying at the Bureau described this as 'leaders stand high and see further'. Unit-chiefs and clerks occupied the space in between, floors 11 to 21. Here, core units were located at higher levels than less important ones and their occupants were referred to by their

Figure 1. Photos taken by the researcher.

lower-floor colleagues as 'those close to the leaders'. Second, employees' workspaces were differently furnished and decorated. A unit comprised two or three adjacently located and equal-sized rooms that opened onto a common corridor through translucent glass doors. Unit-chiefs and clerks occupied different shared room spaces. In the clerks' offices were plastic cubicles with built-in desk panels; these rooms were crowded with up to eight cubicles. The unit-chiefs' offices had high-quality furniture – wooden desks, sofas and leather chairs – and more privacy. Directors' suites were much more private and were richly furnished with heavy wooden doors, television sets, bookshelves, genuine art works, bathrooms and bedrooms. The executive floors were the only spaces in the building where corridors were decorated with red carpets, wood veneers and genuine art works. Finally, hierarchy was reflected in directors' prioritized access to public facilities. Four passenger elevators serviced the entire building. According to employees in the facilities maintenance unit, when not in use two elevators were programmed to wait at floor 24 to facilitate directors' use, and one waited at the executive car-park in the basement. The chief secretary's desk had a 'priority button' installed beneath it. The researcher was shown this, but forbidden to take any photos of it. This priority button allowed the secretary to summon an empty elevator directly to the executive floors. Overall, the building's internal layout minutely specified the Bureau's hierarchy.

Interviews with the Bureau's management suggest that the symbolism of hierarchy was one of the primary considerations for the choice among design alternatives. Zhang, chief liaison for the building construction project, recalled that initially there had been several designs and the one favoured by the American chief-architect was 'something like a semi-circle opera house'. Zhang said that senior executives of the Bureau insisted on the present design: 'I had a hard time trying to convince him [the American] that a round design was not Chinese enough' (15 November 2005). Implicitly, a 'Chinese' spatial design should wherever possible give a strict mapping of hierarchy. For the same reason, the least senior member of the Bureau's executive team was allocated an inferior suite. Deputy-director Qu, who oversaw office allocation and decoration, found this arrangement quite natural:

> Initially we used poly propylene on internal walls [of executive suites]. We used one suite to test it out. It did not look nice, so we used wood for other suites. The original [test] room is still there [laugh]. You may look into Director Zou's office to check it out for yourself.[3] (26 May 2006)

Moving between the pedestrian city streets and the elevated building, and between plastic cubicles and carpeted floors, constantly reminded employees of their places within the Bureau's hierarchy – as they put it, in how 'close' they were to the leaders. Not surprisingly, many of them developed an acute awareness of hierarchical symbols. During the interviews, some pointed to hierarchical designs that the casual visitor might not notice. For instance, one interviewee noted how, in the middle of the staircase between floors 21 and 22, there was a noticeable change in decorating materials (Figure 2). While the four lower steps were of cement, the upper steps had been upgraded and were coated in more expensive material. 'Ridiculous! I don't think you'd believe this if you had not worked here' (Lu, clerk, 16 November 2005). The executive floors started at floor 22; clearly, Lu interpreted the mixed decoration as an intentional signal of hierarchy. Another employee who had been inside the chief-director's suite for facility maintenance commented that:

> She [the chief-director] has the largest bedroom, the most comfortable bathtub, the most expensive television . . . Other directors do not get these. Her bathtub is a massage tub; others only have showers. There are two air-ventilators in her office; there is only one for other directors.[4] (Shen, clerk, 30 November 2005)

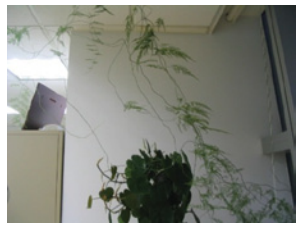
Interestingly, employees came to view the building as proliferating with hierarchical symbols. As a form of daily pleasantry, employees sometimes congratulated each other on their leader-class office space. For instance, the researcher's unit, located on floor 16, was not a core unit. This unit was allocated across three rectangular rooms, one of which faced south-east (the chief-director's suite also faced south-east). This compared with some core units on higher floors that had less favourable shapes (e.g. oddly-shaped corners) or directions. One of the researcher's unit colleagues reflected complacently on her office:

> When we first moved into the building some people started talking to me: 'see, yours is actually one of the powerful units'. I thought about it, and they might be right. What other units own rooms like ours? [giggles] (Wei, clerk, 22 March 2006)

To boost self-esteem, Wei conjured up hierarchical power in places where both she and her interlocutors ought to know – her giggles suggest that she did know – were non-existent, and Deputy-director Qu confirmed that rooms on the same floors were allocated randomly (interview, 26 May 2006). Similar examples were found in photos taken by employees. When asked to capture space that they 'felt strongly about', some employees highlighted exceedingly banal aspects of the building.

What these employees felt strongly about was not the space, but the hierarchical relations it embodied: the oppression, the lack of personal (or botanical) development, and the sense of insignificance that low-ranked clerks at the Bureau typically felt. Ceilings, walls and office views appear, at first glance, utterly standardized and meaningless. They are images that can be found in nearly any contemporary office

This is the ceiling of my office, and this is our life. You work, and when you rest and stretch your neck, you raise you head and this is the first thing you see. Everything here is fitted with a top! (Wu, clerk, 5 May 2006)



People are interested to know how our plants seem to grow well. I think this is because I get them high up there. With no space to grow even plants would be depressed. (Wang, clerk, 27 March 2006)

The other day I was watching pigeons as they flew by. There are no pigeons in this photo but I took another one [with pigeons] on my mobile. Looking at them, it makes you feel small and insignificant in this jungle of cement. (Xu, clerk, 7 March 2006)

Figure 2. Photos taken by the participants.

block around the world. However, these apparently meaningless spaces were understood by employees as expressions of bureaucratic hierarchy and their own places within it.

Familiarization of hierarchy

Employees did not just seek out significations of hierarchy in likely and unlikely places in the building. They also imbued these places with imaginative and highly descriptive narratives to the effect that hierarchical space became familiar and sensible aspects of their everyday lives.

The first narrative concerned the directors' priority elevator button. Employees referred to this button as 'leaders' express' or simply, 'the button'. During morning rush hours, employees waiting in the main lobby often witnessed elevators going by without stopping. On such occasions, expressions such as, 'ah, here comes the express again!' were repeated. The 'express' was an in-joke among employees. While waiting for elevators one morning, the researcher asked an employee what 'leaders' express' meant. He

was given a meaningful look, followed by the comment, 'I see you have not done your homework' (field diary, 14 October 2005). Similarly, when colleagues met in not-so-crowded (and thus leader-class) elevators, they would say something like, 'lucky me, never thought I'd catch an express' (field diary, 17 April 2006). Narrating 'leaders' express' in sarcastic ways, employees showed disaffection with leaders' prioritized access to public facilities.

The second narrative concerned certain 'haunted' corridors in the building. These corridors were known to harm office occupants in secret ways. For instance, one haunted corridor on floor 15 was said to have caused an accident when employees from a nearby unit went out on a trip and their van overturned (field diary, 14 February 2006). Another, on floor 14, was known to be responsible for an unfortunate employee who broke her leg at home, whose father-in-law passed away unexpectedly and whose daughter was diagnosed with leukaemia (field diary, 4 April 2006). Among the victims of haunted corridors was the researcher's colleague-friend Liao. Liao's research (or so he said) on western medieval mythology revealed that his office, situated at the intersection of two corridors on floor 16, was likely haunted. Liao had an overseas master's degree, but was not promoted for many years; he was sure this had much to do with his office location (field diary, 5 May 2006). Stories of haunted corridors circulated widely in the Bureau and were constantly updated. In general, these corridors were described as dark, distressing and filled with strange smells; they seemed also to be limited to the lower parts of the building. It is not difficult to see that, through these stories, employees sought supernatural accounts of how low official ranks caused professional and personal hardships.

The third narrative concerned the building's appearance. The building had a hollowed-out area in its main facade (Figure 1). Documented material and interviews affirmed that this design feature was intended to allow sufficient sunlight to reach neighbouring residential blocks. However, an interpretation constantly heard by the researcher, from employees in different units and positions, was that the building resembled a certain Chinese character in its appearance (the character has a similar hollowed-out part) that happened to be the family name of the Bureau's ex-director. The story went that either the ex-director saw to it personally before his retirement that his name would be permanently inscribed in the Bureau's new high-rise, or, in another version, that the current chief-director was so indebted to her predecessor that she had turned the whole building into a personal memorial.

The fourth narrative was similar. There was a water fountain outside the building's main entrance. Although the fountain was designed to 'enhance the aesthetical harmony of the building with surroundings' (*Design Note*), it was interpreted differently. In the Chinese language, the character for 'water-flow' was pronounced (but not written) the same as the chief-director's family name. During a cigarette-break, Liao pointed out to the researcher the uncanny similarity between those two pronunciations. Liao said that people in his unit, after some discussion, agreed that the water fountain was 'something like a personal mark' (field diary, 7 April 2006). It seemed that the chief-director had, in an ingenious way, designed her family name into another architectural aspect of the building.

In the last two narratives, employees conjured up the images of traditional family heads in China whose names were representative of household properties.[5] They implied that the

chief-director (and her predecessor) commanded supreme and unchallengeable authority at the Bureau. Perhaps for this reason the Bureau's executives acquiesced to, if not welcomed, the wide circulation of these narratives. The researcher tentatively mentioned 'the Chinese character' to Deputy-director Qu, only to find he was not at all annoyed: 'So you have heard? [laugh] *That* character, right? Idle talk, stupid thing . . . You see some people like to make fun of such things' (26 May 2006).

In the above sketches, we see how employees fabricated narratives around the Bureau's spaces, from elevators, to corridors and the building's appearance. Through these narratives, the building was experienced as totally hierarchical and, importantly, hierarchy was interpreted as personally meaningful, causally logical and genealogically coherent. Thus, hierarchical space was made a familiar aspect of the Bureau's everyday lives.

Ritualization of hierarchy

It is hardly surprising that, having made hierarchy a proliferated and familiar theme of their spatial environs, the Bureau's employees continued to act it out in their daily lives. On one occasion, when the chief-director had a meeting on floor 11, a deputy-chief sealed off the bathroom on that floor, reserving it for the exclusive use of the director (field diary, 22 March 2006). This deputy-chief was described by many as an 'unbearable toady', and some commented sarcastically that she was promoted quickly for her sycophancy. The truthfulness of such accounts notwithstanding, it was observed that generally employees placed great emphasis on acting out respect for bureaucratic hierarchy.

Acts of respect at the Bureau took many forms. For instance, calling leaders by their full names was inappropriate, at least in public places. The following scene took place in an elevator (field diary, 6 January 2006):

> *Employee A* (talking to his colleague): Chief Zhao was on a business trip again.
> *Researcher* (interrupting): What a busy man Zhao Qiang is.
> *Employee A* (looking around rather angrily): *Chief* Zhao is a busy man!

Another form of respect involved treating certain spaces as leaders' reserved territories. For instance, high floors were acknowledged to be leaders' proper residence space. In one interview, the researcher asked his unit-chief, who was also a colleague-friend, how he would allocate office space if he had the chance. The unit-chief anticipated the researcher's intentions, saying: 'So you want me to put our leaders in the basement? This is not possible. *You* know it is not possible' (Jiao, unit-chief, 2 June 2006). Leaders' parking lots were reserved territory. Garage staff told the researcher that random parking was common, but that people always 'behaved themselves' with respect to directors' parking lots. 'Sometimes they [directors] might be away for weeks, and these spaces would be empty for weeks. I don't have to remind people' (Xue, security guard, 10 April 2006). This applied also to how cars were occupied. The researcher observed that the leader was always given a back seat when travelling with subordinates.

A predominant form of respect at the Bureau was for employees to maintain the accepted order when walking, sitting or waiting with leaders. In interview, an employee with 17 years of service described how he gave a new recruit his first lesson in behaviour at the Bureau:

> Suppose you are in front of an elevator and you meet a leader. You'd let him enter first. This is the way things ought to be. If you take the stairs, you must follow him, you cannot walk in front of him. (He, clerk, 20 April 2006)

Walking order was important at the Bureau. The executive team sometimes went to lunch together. Usually the directors were engaged in discussion and walked in a close group, but however heated the discussions might become, the careful observer would notice that the chief-director always led the group walk. There was a studied easiness in the way that the deputies moved: another half a step from a subordinate and the chief-director would lose her lead. Care that this should happen was always observed.

In the municipal government, the Bureau had a reputation for its 'army of capable girls'. In China's patriarchal culture, it was deemed phenomenal that a female chief-director effectively subjugated male colleagues.

The Bureau's walking order was strictly observed at all levels: subordinates learnt to follow a common leader and hierarchical linearity mandated that each must position him/herself in relation to everyone else who was walking. An example is the grand assembly that all employees attended. Customarily, 13 members of the executive team would walk to the panel in strict single file after the other employees were seated. Officially, the executive team consisted of only two ranks, but knowledge about directors' seniority, number of core units under their command and, most importantly, their likelihood of career progression, were referenced to decide the walking order. Every member of the team knew his/her exact position in this single-file walk. This ceremonious walk, exposed to the gaze of a large audience, was executed with great precision because it defined a hierarchy that only inside members of the Bureau were privy to and could appreciate. Thus, any slight change in walking order excited days of gossip in the office of the researcher's unit, about which leader was going up, and which was going down.

Walking orders were so ingrained in the Bureau that when no hierarchical differences applied to a group, employees created them, in their games of 'playing the leader'. One game involved the researcher and his colleague-friend Liao. If the two met in front of the door to the toilets, Liao would stop, pat the researcher on the shoulder, and say: 'Come on, come on, leader, you first' (field diary, 25 October 2005). This became a standard joke between the two despite both being section-clerks. Elevator entrances and toilet doors were favourite spots for one person to suddenly step back and push a colleague into 'leadership'.

Seating order was equally important. The following paragraph is from a field diary (16 January 2006). It describes an occasion when Deputy-director Meng and eight members of the researchers' unit enjoyed a festival banquet held at a holiday resort:

> The director was late. After the table was set there was plenty of time to decide on the seating order. The director, apparently, would occupy the host seat, and Jiao the unit-chief would sit at

> his left-hand side – in the Chinese tradition, this seat belongs to the most senior guest. But who would sit on the right? Someone suggested Ye, for although Ye was a section-clerk he seemed to be favoured by the director. Of course Ye protested violently. Heated but jovial discussions on the right-hand seat went on for the next fifteen minutes. And then it suddenly occurred to us that we might be mistaken about the location of the host seat. This thought caused havoc among us. We called in a head-waiter, and the head-waiter consulted his manager to confirm. Finally, all was settled. The most senior clerk took up the seat on the director's right side, and then the second most senior clerk placed her handbag on the seat directly opposite to the director's. From there things were easy. We each evaluated our positions in the unit and followed the order.

Finally, the order of arrival counted. The researcher and his unit colleagues sometimes gave official welcomes to visiting delegations from abroad. One essential skill involved in this job was not to anticipate the arrival of the plane, but to anticipate of the arrival of those in senior positions. For instance, the plane was due at 14:00. As a gesture of courtesy it was decided that a deputy-director met guests in person. This director was scheduled to arrive at 13:40, considering that the plane might be early. Now the unit-chief, who naturally must accompany his superior on the occasion, must arrive no later than 13:20, considering that the director might arrive early. This calculation went on. Consequently, as the lowest ranking official of the group the researcher decided to arrive at 12:40. It mattered little when the plane was due. What mattered was that employees of lower ranks arrived before their leaders.

These everyday episodes show how hierarchy was established through daily practices, such as using leaders' titles and treating certain spaces as leaders' reserved territories. Orders of walking, seating and arrival were observed strictly in order to give leaders the proper respect on social occasions. Such activities took on the form of rituals because they followed socially normalized scripts, and also were often meant to be enacted in front of an audience not involved in actions. Hierarchy was ritualized in the everyday practices of the Bureau's space.

Discussion

Above, we traced the everyday production of the Bureau's space, and outlined three interrelated processes. Employees proliferated the symbolism of hierarchy to non-hierarchical aspects of the building's design. They familiarized themselves with hierarchical spaces by fabricating and circulating meaningful narratives about them. They also acted out this space in ritualized forms such that bureaucratic authority was properly respected in everyday activities. Below, we abstract from the case to identify some more general everyday processes that reproduce (rather than undermine) dominant power relations in an organization.

Proliferation: Homogenizing hierarchical space

The Bureau's new building was extremely symbolic. Its contour and colour patterns represented rational thinking (Witkin, 1990); its outlook was a phallic symbol of male domination that abounds in current corporate landscapes (Douglas, 2004). However, the

dominant symbolism was bureaucratic hierarchy. As employees moved up the career ladder they were entitled to more elevated, larger, more private and more richly decorated spaces. Some facilities, such as the massage tub, were symbolic more than functional. The Bureau was typical of many offices around the world where hierarchy is expressed forcibly in spatial symbols (Baldry, 1999; Rosen et al., 1990; Van Marrewijk, 2009).

When experiencing this space, employees typically drew on the dominant symbolism of hierarchy. Recall that one employee mused that 'everything here is fitted with a top'. Another saw room-shape as hierarchy-sensitive, based on her observation that leaders were entitled to better offices. This is because the building exemplified what phenomenologists call the 'horizon' or 'field' of perception (Husserl, 1983; Merleau-Ponty, 1964): employees' sense of a normal reality was sustained by relating perceived objects as semantically coherent with other objects around them. The building's dominant symbolism set a tone that endowed common aspects of architectural space – ceilings, walls and fountains – with hierarchy.

Researchers have noted that employees experience organizational space in heterogeneous ways when making reference to their personal life histories (Van Marrewijk and Yanow, 2010; Yanow, 1995). The process of proliferation reminds us that manipulations in spatial designs can evoke relatively homogeneous spatial experiences across an organization. At the Bureau, it effectively reinforced hierarchy as hierarchical space became the pervading, and hence normal, physical lifeworld.

Familiarization: Mocking hierarchical space

Similar to many fairly standardized offices around the world, the Bureau's new building was designed to embody instrumental rationality (Martin, 2003). It exemplified a 'non-place' devoid of personal relations, histories or identities (Augé, 1995). Sociologists and geographers believe that a primary imperative for space dwellers is to convert geometrically abstract space into meaningful places such that the space becomes inhabitable (Bachelard, 1969; Tuan, 1977). In line with this observation, we found that employees invested the Bureau's space with a series of narratives that were rich in rhetoric and imagination. Through these narratives, employees animated what otherwise might be experienced as an abstract and potentially alienating non-place with personal meanings, histories and a sense of genealogy.

We found that employees' spatial narratives typically sought to account for directors' hierarchical power compared to clerks' lack of power. Such narratives were described by one employee as the 'homework' required to navigate the bureaucratic everyday. These narratives were humorous; they offered employees a temporary 'escape route' from the 'paramount reality' of bureaucratic hierarchy (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). While the building was designed to establish hierarchy as a formal aspect of everyday lives, employees' spatial narratives rendered hierarchy ridiculous. In these narratives, hierarchical power did not seem to stem from the formal legal system of bureaucracy (Weber, 1947); instead, it hinged precariously on natural blood bonds (e.g. leaders as family heads) and even the work of supernatural forces (e.g. the haunted corridor). The narratives were typically ironic insofar as they showed the apparently arbitrary nature of bureaucratic space.

Looming over employees' narrative appropriation of space was a cynical self that remained dis-identified with the ideology of hierarchy (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). This self quickly identified ways of appropriating the dominating space of hierarchy, and yet it chose to hide in safety behind inaction and explained such inaction to a compassionate peer as an understandable survival strategy (e.g. 'So you want me to put our leaders in the basement? *You* know it is not possible!').

In line with some existing studies (Halford and Leonard, 2006; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011), we found that employees kept a distance from the managerial spatial ideologies through their narratives about space. Nevertheless, the process of familiarization reminds us that the poetics of place-making can breed a cynical self, which, as in the Bureau's case, ultimately reinforces the dominant power relations by enacting disaffection through mockery rather than confrontation.

Ritualization: Mobilizing hierarchical space

Everyday practices of space at the Bureau took ritualized forms. Ritual connected actions with meanings (Beyer and Trice, 1988; Goffman, 1961); by exposing actions to a keenly observant audience, they placed employees under pressure to act out hierarchy in normative and consistent ways, for inconsistent acts were likely to be interpreted by the audience as evidence of insincere intentions on the part of the actors (Goffman, 1990). In short, rituals highlighted public performances of hierarchy as definitive of obedience to hierarchy. Some employees publically humiliated their colleagues, for instance, by insisting on 'correct' ways of addressing leaders, so that their own performances would be regarded as credit worthy.

Employees frequently demonstrated playfulness through their performance of hierarchy. For instance, those at the banquet knew the seating order once the host seat was confirmed, but continued to negotiate the seating as if they did not. Similarly, in the 'leader, you first' game, the researcher and his colleague-friend staged the sacred leadership (Grint, 2010) in an apparently profane space. These games were more than gestures of common courtesies, for they revealed a self that was fully aware of, and was playing among, action alternatives. Employees acted out hierarchy not because they desired and respected it; they voluntarily abandoned other options only for the sake of putting on a good performance. Thus, the unit-chief who sealed off the bathroom exposed herself to public shame because she exhibited great sincerity in desiring hierarchy. The cynical self that circulated spatial narratives loomed large also in everyday spatial practices.

As Goffman (1990) tellingly points out, the cynical self often studies his/her script with extra care when staging a performance. At the Bureau, performing hierarchy was straightforward when the leaders' space was clearly indicated, for instance, at banqueting tables or in cars. However, employees seemed particularly adept at creating new ritualized spaces for leaders. They adopted several strategies. First, when walking across an open space employees positioned themselves carefully in relation to leaders so that bureaucratic hierarchy was demonstrated by the positioning of the bodily fronts (Tuan, 1977). Second, employees made use of the linear logic of time (Hassard, 1991) to establish hierarchy in airport lounges. Third, employees reconstructed the work/leisure boundary (Nippert-Eng, 1995) by staging shows of respect at a holiday resort. Through

ritualization, hierarchical space became mobilized. It was no longer confined to some fixed, clear-cut, spatial domains; instead, the space of hierarchy became synonymous with the space of the Bureau employees' everyday lives.

Recent studies highlight that ways of using space reconstruct social space in organizations (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Wapshott and Mallett, 2012). The process of ritualization reflects this view. It tells us that minute spatial practices, such as walking, finding seats and timing arrivals, can effectively reproduce the dominant power relations in organizations. It tells us also that body (Hurdley, 2010; Tyler and Cohen, 2010), temporal linearity and physical boundary are key elements of this reproduction.

Summary: The everyday production of social space

The processes we have identified illustrate some complex dynamics within Lefebvre's spatial triad. Although the ways that space is conceived effectively solicit homogeneous lived experiences, space users always retain some degree of autonomy, for instance, in cynically mocking the social space they perceive as normal. Such interchange affects the ways space is practised in everyday lives, and, in the Bureau's case, produced a social space more pervasive and dominant than originally conceived. These processes enable us to expound and integrate some of the arguments in the literature of social space. Indeed, everyday lives are neither determined by, nor are they spontaneous in, resisting spatially designed-in power relations (Dale and Burrell, 2008), but to uncover why this is so we need to look in detail at the ways that social space comes into being in everyday organizational lives (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012). In our view, exploring this everyday production of social space means prizing open the processes that link the conceived, lived and practised moments of Lefebvre's triad.

Conclusion

This study draws on a ten-month ethnographic study investigating the production of social space in a Chinese government office (the 'Bureau'). We found that the Bureau's hierarchical space was produced through three intertwined processes: proliferation, familiarization and ritualization. Through proliferation employees homogenized their spatial experiences and came to see hierarchy as ubiquitous. Through familiarization employees circulated ironic narratives about hierarchical space, which made the workspace inhabitable, but also kept them in cynical inaction. Through ritualization employees mobilized hierarchy in minute practices, often for the sake of demonstrating obedience to hierarchy before peers, such that hierarchical space permeated their entire lifeworld at work. These processes allow us to appreciate that what came to dominate in the Bureau's everyday lives was a social space of hierarchy far beyond the building itself, but one that employees had simultaneously resisted and constructed.

These findings contribute to the literature in a number of ways. First, we question some recent micro-approaches to organizational space. Most existing work reveals (e.g. Halford and Leonard, 2006) or emphasizes (e.g. Wapshott and Mallett, 2012) the social space constructed in everyday lives as the seat of resistant or alternative understandings and practices of space. In contrast, in our case the kind of social space that was

constructed was a fulcrum enabling the reinforcement of spatialized power relations. This reminds us of the need for caution against over-romanticizing the politicality of the production of social space in everyday organizational lives. The processes we outlined help to explain how a reinforced space of domination is generated. Second, we contribute to work on organizational social space by specifying a potentially fruitful method of enquiry. While numerous studies refer to Lefebvre's triad, they tend to treat its three moments in isolation (e.g. Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). We suggest that a focus on the dynamics among these moments might yield more insights into organizational space as an intrinsically contested and undetermined social terrain (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Finally, this study provides some rare insights into China's bureaucratic everyday. Although images of Chinese bureaucracy occasionally appear in films and novels, few accounts exist of the everyday lives inside it. This study presents a picture of bureaucratic life sustained by employees' dutiful reproduction of the space that they occupied day in and day out.

Our study has several limitations. First, we focus on a particular type of organization (i.e. bureaucratic organization). However, there are many other modes of organizing. For instance, more work is needed to explore how non-bureaucratic organizations, such as sole-traders, street marketers and other small operators, constitute their organization by using space (see Munro and Jordan, 2013). Second, our study is based in the particular cultural context of China. Indeed, the focus on micro-level conformity to dominant social relations might be seen as typical of a highly collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1981). While we think that the cultural context is important, studies in more individualist contexts show that employees tend to conform to many spatially encoded power relations, including hierarchy (e.g. Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). It would be interesting to see whether the processes identified in our study hold in other cultural contexts. Third, we focus on how hierarchical space is produced in an organization. This may have missed the reproduction of other types of social space, such as gendered space (Tyler and Cohen, 2010). This omission should be addressed in future research exploring the production of organizational space in relation to broader forms of social domination, such as gender, race, class and sexuality.

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Notes

1 'Leader', 'ling-dao' in Chinese mandarin, is synonymous with 'manager' in Chinese bureaucracy. In this article, we employ the term as a member category, not as what ethno-methodologists would call an 'analyst's category'. In other words, this term is used not to indicate any of the characteristics usually associated with leaders in the vast academic literature on leadership. In a sense, we are responding to Kelly's (2008) call to examine how participants use the notion of 'leadership' in particular local settings.

2 The eight titles, standardized by *the Chinese Law of Civil Service*, are: director, deputy-director, unit-chief, deputy-chief, unit-clerk, section-clerk, senior-clerk and junior-clerk.

3 The Bureau's executive team consisted of three directors and ten deputy-directors. Officially, the chief-director was on a par with two other directors, but since she was in charge of the Bureau's most important units, she was the top decision-maker. Similarly, Director Zou was the least senior deputy-director because he was in charge of the logistic units and also because he was due to retire.

4 Admittedly, few employees got to look inside the directors' bathrooms, but in the course of daily conversations, the researcher discovered that most employees knew exactly which facilities were provided to the directors. It should be added also that bathrooms and bedrooms were partly functional since it was common for Bureau employees to work overtime. However, since clerks and unit-chiefs were not provided with similar facilities to ease their overtime working, in our view these facilities can be considered symbols of hierarchy.

5 In China, the last names of family heads are used to identify family properties. For instance, Zhang's family house is called 'Zhang Fu' – 'Fu' literally means 'luxurious abode'. Also, the traditional Chinese society is a patriarchy in which family heads have supreme power over family members (Balazs, 1964).

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