

SUMMARY

There is a legacy of misplaced emphasis on culture by organization and business scholars to explain work and work relations in Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Often the term *guanxi*, or strong, long-term, and personal relations, becomes the framework in such explanations. In contrast, this thesis examines the phenomenon of social detachment using a category of relationality I label as impersonal relations. These consist of non-affective, calculating, professional, power-neutral, no-obligation ties, and practices found in two Chinese SMEs, SEA-EAD and QLA, where I conducted my nine-month research in 2009-2010.

I argue that impersonal relations are permanent features of transient employment firms. These firms operate using flexible work practices to facilitate rapid transactions and movement of money and human capital. The result is a firm that is highly fluid, shifting, and uncertain. This type of non-stable firm needs a framework such as Marilyn Strathern's actor-network theory. The framework advocates for a network model of a firm that focuses on context-specific links as analytical points. Using her framework to study work and relationality, my findings show that there are three types of impersonal relations.

The first type of impersonal relations uses ties of information control that produces highly contingent work and social detachment as seen at SEA-EAD. The SEA-EAD agents expand ties with education brokers to gather information and restrict access once commissions are awarded. Simultaneously, agents limit information from management to maintain their career viability inside and outside the firm.

The second type of impersonal relations uses ties of individual status that results in more stable impersonal relations and work routines as observed at QLA. The QLA staff performs obedience within office hierarchy as part of their work. However, once outside of work, such as during an office party or the lunch hour, QLA employees use ritual-like practices to distinguish themselves individually and reject food-related overtures for sustained long-term connection.

The third type of impersonal relations uses ties of power difference. My findings show that the restoration of professional interactions during conflict resolution practices are ritual-like, affect-based performances. However, the goal is not to establish personal ties but rather, re-establish trustworthy, power-neutral, professional relations to facilitate swift transactions.

These findings suggest that impersonal relations at SEA-EAD and QLA are highly adaptive to the flexible labour and work demands in SMEs that are transient employment destinations. Employee detachment ensures readiness to move jobs when an opportunity becomes available. Manager detachment allows for rapid troubleshooting and swift decision-making at nominal cost and effort. Professional customer-agent relations restore relational inequity from fraudulent activities. While impersonal relations provide the minimal trust and transactional efficiency, these same ties pose chronic risks to firms such as high employee turnover, work unpredictability, and transaction fraud.

Impersonal relations and the ensuing social detachment transform our understanding of Chinese SMEs as porous anchor points that accelerate the movement of people, information, and financial capital in China's flexible market-socialist economy.

Keywords:

relationality, impersonal relations, social detachment, guanxi, individuality, suzhi, organisational culture, obedient autonomy, office lunch, China, ritual, SME, MSME, microenterprises, migration agents, migration firms, study abroad, mobility, flexible firms, flexible labour, flexible capitalism