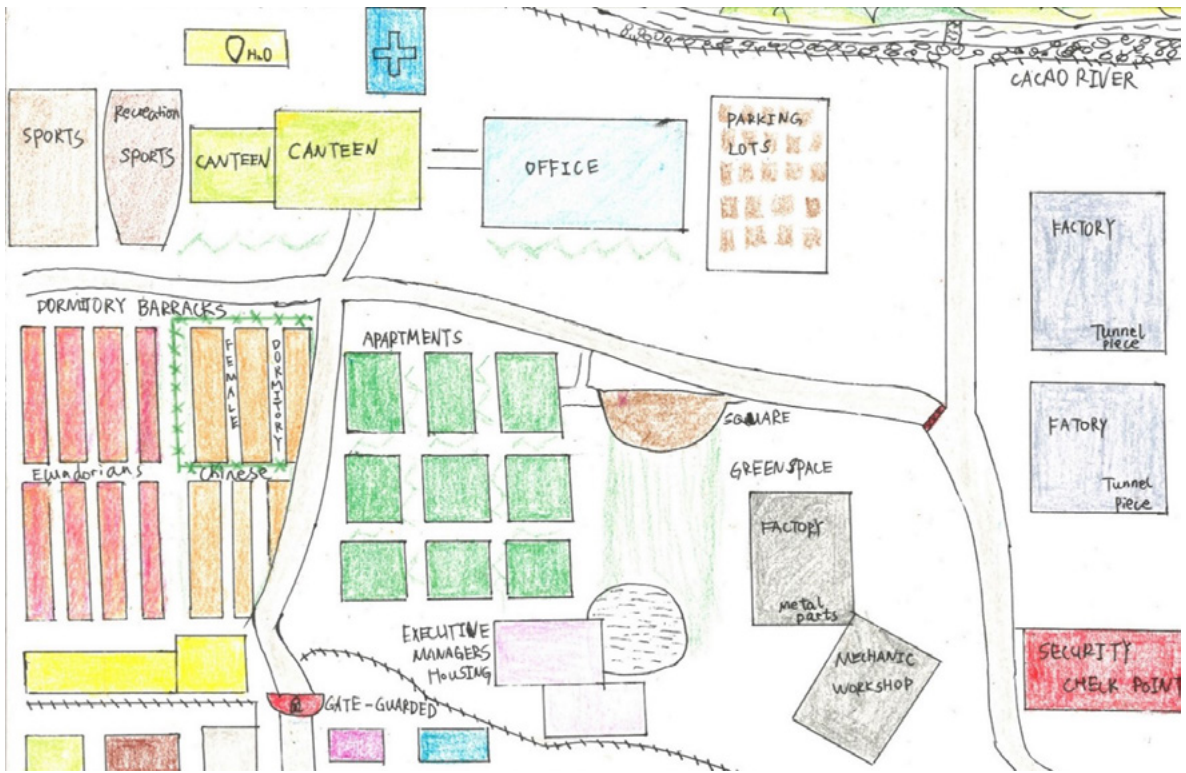




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**San Luis Camp**

Figure 1: The layout of the San Luis Camp, shown under its pseudonym, 'San Jorge Village'. Source: Rui Jie Peng.

# Gendered Space and Labour Control in a Chinese State-Sponsored Hydroelectric Project in Ecuador

Rui Jie PENG

*Building on a critical analysis of spatial politics, this essay uses ethnographic evidence from the Chinese state-sponsored Coca Coda Sinclair (CCS) Hydroelectric Project in Ecuador to explore how the transnational Sinohydro organises boundaries between spaces, bodies, and symbolic differences to relationally produce and maintain the hierarchical organisation of work and life at the construction site. The article zooms in on how the small number of Chinese female workers living at the base camp organise their rhythms of work and life within that space, and how such practices confirm, while also subtly contesting, racialised and gendered relationships and boundaries that were reinforced by the spatial arrangements at the site. Tracing the spatial design and logic behind China's overseas projects can help reveal the broader cultural and labour politics these projects engender in local contexts.*

**C**ritical geographers have been exploring how social actors organise space to sustain unequal social relations and how, in turn, these relations shape the space and politics around them. In examining how ‘place becomes race’, Razack (2018: 114) elaborates on how settler-colonial projects remake the conquered land into white settler society by producing segregated spaces and racial hierarchies. Based on Henri Lefebvre’s theorisation of spatial politics, this approach shows that racial hierarchies operate with gender and class domination while simultaneously constituting and reinforcing each other.

In analysing spatial politics, Lefebvre identifies three elements in the production of social space—that is, conceived, perceived, and experienced (or lived) space. First, conceived space, or representations of space, refers to how planners and corporate entities conceive of and plan spatial organisation. Second, perceived space emerges from the everyday routines and spatial practices that organise social life and inform people about their relative identities within a space. Finally, experienced (or lived) space is ‘directly lived through its associated images and symbols’, and ‘is the dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate’ (Lefebvre 1991: 39).

Building on this critical analysis of space and spatial politics, I use ethnographic evidence from my research on the transnational Coca Coda Sinclair (CCS) Hydroelectric Project in Ecuador. The CCS is a hydroelectric dam construction project contracted to Sinohydro Corporation, a Chinese state-owned construction firm, and funded by a 1.7-billion-USD Chinese Government loan that Ecuador agreed to repay with oil exports (Escribano 2013; for more details about the project, see Castro 2022). I conducted fieldwork for four months during 2013 and 2014 to explore how Sinohydro organises boundaries between spaces, bodies, and symbolic differences to relationally produce and maintain the daily organisation of work and life at the construction site. Because I am a Chinese person fluent in Spanish and the project had a severe shortage of interpreters, during my research, both Chinese and Ecuadorian employees often asked for my help with interpretation. In an environment in which mutual understanding was at best a challenge, my linguistic ability and efforts to facilitate communication between the Chinese and Ecuadorian employees also allowed me to closely observe their daily work and personal interactions.

Using Lefebvre's theory of social space, which brings together the materiality and symbolic meanings of space structured by relationships of production and reproduction (see Razack 2018: 119), my analysis traces how spatial design encodes messages about where one should be and to whom one should relate. This design reveals the labour and social controls the Chinese company and its capital impose on all workers. I zoom in on how the small number of Chinese female workers living at the base camp organise their rhythms of work and life within that space, and how such practices confirm and subtly contest racialised and gendered relationships and boundaries that were reinforced by the spatial arrangements at the site.

I begin with a spatial analysis of the built environment of the CCS Project's base camp, where the Chinese and Ecuadorian construction engineers and workers are housed. I further problematise the fence around the female dormitory as a symbol of spatial demarcation and differentiated bodies moving through space. I argue that the fence implicitly signifies the international division between Chinese capital and an underdeveloped Ecuador, and the class and social divisions between superior Chinese managers and engineers and unskilled local workers. As Chinese global capital relies on spatial and social organisation to routinely condition workers to a prescribed workplace rhythm and discipline, I show how the employees interpret the company's representation of space and learn its rules and boundaries. The female Chinese employees, for example, adapted their own spatial practices, leveraging their relative social positions to push against the porosity of those boundaries. I argue that the social organisation of space not only reveals the cultural and labour politics that China's state-owned capital was shaping on the ground in Ecuador. The conceived space also structures emergent social interactions and forms new and intersecting power hierarchies along lines of nationality (Chinese versus Ecuadorian), class, and gender.

## The Organisation of Space

The CCS Project is about 170 kilometres east of the Ecuadorian capital, Quito, at the boundary of the Andean highlands and the Amazon rainforest where several rivers converge to form the San Rafael Falls. In 2013, during my first research trip, a colleague introduced me to a Chinese manager in charge of Sinohydro's construction projects in Ecuador. Being a Chinese person and graduate of a renowned university helped me gain permission to conduct research on the CCS Project. In December 2013, the manager sent me to ride with workers in a project vehicle to the main base camp, next to the construction site for the project's water diversion tunnel. After a four-hour drive, we arrived at the base camp entrance. The driver carefully turned on to a paved road leading to a gate guarded by black-uniformed Ecuadorian security guards (hired from a local company) sitting in a booth. Off to the right was a muddy, faded sign identifying this as the CCS Hydroelectric Project camp. To the left of the gate, a stone pedestal with Chinese characters spelled out the name Sinohydro Corporation (中国水电). Because the gate was off the road with hardly any signage, it was difficult to locate the entrance.

When one of the security guards walked towards the car with a writing pad in hand, the driver pulled over, rolled down his window, and handed the guard his ID card. The guard then dutifully logged the driver's identification number on the sign-in sheet. The guard then looked inside the car, making eye contact as he noted each passenger. As he drew back, he finally waved his hand to let the car enter.

As we proceeded, we encountered another gate guarded by more local security guards, who performed the same procedure with the driver and passengers. We then arrived at the central office complex—a single-storey building with beige walls and a light-blue metal roof (see Figure 2) adjoining neatly laid out housing and dining facilities. I joined a group of new personnel checking in as we watched construction materials being delivered at the front of the office. An Ecuadorian security guard in an orange reflective vest also sat there, scanning people as they passed. The isolation of the base camp was in sharp relief with the buzz of activity and people at the office complex. I drew a map to show the layout of the base camp (Figure 1).

Named after the adjacent village of San Luis, the base camp served as the headquarters for four construction sites. It housed the engineers, business and administrative staff, and Chinese and Ecuadorian workers building the water diversion tunnel across the Coca River. Before the project began, Sinohydro had carefully planned the spatial organisation of the base camp, and the design team completed several rounds of modifications to adapt this to local housing standards. They marked off spaces for different types of housing with clear boundaries such as the fence around the female dormitories. Although the building quality was improved from that on the plan, Sinohydro insisted on maintaining rigid patriarchal boundaries based on professional, national, and gender status for the Chinese and Ecuadorian employees who would be working at the site.



### Quito

Figure 2: The office complex. Source: Rui Jie Peng.

The office complex was the most prominent structure and the central hub for work and life. Inside the building, each of the project's departments occupied a spacious room (close to 100 square metres), well equipped with office furniture and supplies, conference rooms, and a wireless internet network. As the Chinese engineer in charge of designing the spatial layout of the camp explained to me:

The Chinese employees on the project greatly appreciated having access to this spacious office because it was built according to the standards of a permanent building compared to the temporary buildings they were used to on construction sites in China.

The Chinese employees also enjoyed being in the office complex because its spatial organisation highlighted the superior managerial positions they occupied compared with the Ecuadorians. The department directors divided the large office for engineers and business staff into clusters of desks grouped according to professional rank. Within each department, higher-ranking employees such as directors and lead engineers, all of whom were Chinese, occupied one or two desks in a corner away from the rest of the staff. Lower-ranking employees worked



face-to-face at a larger workstation with four desks pushed together, meaning they were highly aware of one another's schedules and tasks. The Chinese employees usually sat near the windows with views of the neat garden, while the Ecuadorian employees sat by the hallway. The lowest-ranking Ecuadorian secretaries (all of whom were women) occupied the transitional spot next to the door.

The location of the desks of the female Ecuadorian secretaries and Chinese interpreters was flexible—their spatial assignments subject to the director's often arbitrary discretion. I observed that two Ecuadorian secretaries shared a desk, but they did not always stay there because the desk could be turned into a temporary place to pile project files or host visitors from other departments or camps.

In an environment in which people interpreted spatial assignments as corresponding to and displaying one's status in the hierarchy and their attendant privileges, the fact that the Chinese engineers and managers occupied the prime areas in the office while the Ecuadorians and women were assigned peripheral areas conveyed the practical boundaries that divided the workers—marked by professional rank, nationality, and gender.

The employees' dormitories at the base camp also had clearly demarcated hierarchical boundaries. The apartments and barracks sprawled to the east of the office complex across a 5-metre-wide path. Each of the nine two-storey buildings, dubbed 'apartments' by employees, had eight rooms equipped with internet connections, satellite televisions, and private bathrooms. Each room housed usually only one person, or occasionally two. Managers and senior staff could take advantage of the larger space and spend more time alone. Across a paved path were single-storey barracks housing male Chinese and Ecuadorian construction workers and junior staff that were assigned according to nationality. Typically, six to eight people of the same nationality shared one small room. Each unit was equipped with a communal bathroom but did not have internet access. Once, when I accompanied a Chinese manager to examine a typical male dormitory room, he described the situation: 'The bunks take up most of the space in a room. Aisles between the bunks are constantly crammed with dirty clothes and shoes.'

At the beginning of my research, I expected that Chinese construction workers in a foreign country sharing a room and similar cultural backgrounds would develop a high level of personal friendship or solidarity. This was not the case. Male workers and engineers told me that the rooms were so small and messy that they were almost intolerable for day-to-day living, so most people chose to stay up late in the office and only came to the dormitories to sleep. In addition to the tight space, the deliberate placement of the younger engineers with middle-aged construction workers tended to make personal connections harder to develop. A recently graduated Chinese engineer from Beijing told me: 'I had little in common with the middle-aged workers because we were of different generations and socio-cultural backgrounds. Even though I stayed with them for a year, we hardly talked and never developed personal connections.'

Though several younger engineers asked to share a room with their peers and have better furnishings, the company turned down their requests, arguing that dorm capacity was severely limited.

This organisation significantly shaped the social dynamics of the workplace. One major finding of my study was that although Chinese employees came from a more developed country and held higher-status jobs, they were compensated at a lower rate and had fewer labour rights than their Ecuadorian counterparts. Yet, unlike the Ecuadorian workers, the Chinese did not engage in collective organising or bargaining. I argue that because the Chinese employees were temporary migrant workers recruited and compensated under Chinese labour market standards and governed by Chinese labour laws and workplace culture, instead of making collective demands, they found it more effective to embody the ‘tough worker’ identity to increase their bargaining power and resolve their grievances on an individual basis (for more details on different labour rights and employees’ responses, see Peng 2021). On top of that, Sinohydro relied on spatial organisation that separated Chinese employees by class and nationality, to add another layer of control over worker relationships.

Like class and nationality, gendered space was prominently delimited with a green fence around the two dormitories housing about 30 mostly Chinese female employees (see Figure 3), the only opening in which was a small door on to a well-lit path leading directly to the canteens and office building.

## The Gendered Space Division

The CCS, like other hydroelectric construction projects, is a male-dominated workplace. Chinese women occupied specialised and technical jobs as interpreters, accountants, heavy machinery operators, and cement technicians. Known for working meticulously and skilfully, Chinese women specialising in technical areas, such as heavy machinery operators, outcompeted men, while female interpreters and business staff were bilingual and more culturally aware, with a sophisticated ability to smoothly navigate cultural and social boundaries. Ecuadorian women occupied low-status jobs as secretaries, cleaners, and kitchen helpers.

Due to the small number of women working at the base camp, the dormitory housing Chinese women was much less crowded than the men’s. Typically, two women roomed together, and each had her own bunk, storing their clothing and belongings on its upper level; some even managed to bring a wardrobe or desk into the room. Yet, even though the rooms were more comfortable and spacious than those in the male dormitories, as I will show, the fence enclosing the dormitory strongly symbolised both the spatial and the social control of women’s work and everyday lives.





More than a few times, I had heated discussions with administrators and staff about their attitudes towards and opinions about women. The engineers and managers, almost all of whom were men, called themselves ‘hydro-workers’ (水电工人)—a label often invoked together with descriptions of harsh working conditions on construction sites in the wilderness to express implicitly masculine connotations (see Peng 2021). They were not reticent about saying women were out of place on the project. A geological surveyor named Jiayi summarised the sentiment: ‘Let me tell you: hydroelectric construction sites are very harsh working environments; we often work in the wilderness. Women are not made to do this type of job. Besides, they face male aggression and need to be protected.’

In daily interactions, similarly biased remarks abounded: most men believed men and women had different aptitudes for construction work. The dormitory fence symbolised the exclusion of women. Since women were out of place, their bodies had to

### The Dormitory

Figure 3: The fenced-off female dormitory. Source: Rui Jie Peng.

be controlled. That shared perception among the men strengthened the commonly held view that only men were suited to do this kind of work and affirmed their sense of solidarity. But because the smooth operation of the construction project was reliant on these women performing technical and specialised jobs as machinery operators, interpreters, and business staff, male ‘hydro-workers’ felt a need to defend their central place in the professional hierarchy. The spatial and symbolic framing of women as subjects in need of protection reinforced the gendered beliefs that women were unfit for and, at best, auxiliaries in the hydroelectric construction industry.

The fences around the women’s dormitory visually and materially marked off an area distinct from the rest of the base camp. The Chinese camp designers regarded it as a ‘protected’ zone designed to ward off threats. The Chinese directors and managers often mentioned that local Ecuadorian men usually had multiple wives and were casual in their relationships, and Chinese female employees were constantly trying to fend off unwanted attention from Ecuadorian male workers. It was obvious that the ‘threats’ referred to possible aggression from the Ecuadorian male workers living in the camp. The fence, as a visual and boundary marker, gave the ‘illusion of transparency’ (Lefebvre 1991: 28)—the impression that the subordinate group’s daily activities and work performances could be read and thus controlled. In this way, the fence created readable and reproducible spaces that confirmed and accentuated the assumed hierarchy among Chinese and Ecuadorian employees, men and women, and more skilled and less skilled workers.

Divisions that specifically concerned Chinese female employees were the discourses and collective practices portraying them as sexually conservative and thus disciplined by patriarchal norms of female conduct. This was achieved by discursively constructing Ecuadorian women as the sexually loose ‘others’ and less skilled than Chinese women. Chinese women—including myself—were often told not to go outside the camp alone. After I persistently asked why, one senior engineer explained:

Places like this [outside the camp] are not safe and appropriate for Chinese women. Locals are too open: the men have multiple wives, and women are casual and loose. But Chinese women are professional and prudish, better protected inside the camp.

The discourse portraying Chinese women as ‘professional and prudish’ and ‘protected’ by boundaries such as the fence reflected the broader Chinese managerial ethos that state-owned companies like Sinohydro sought to transplant to the overseas workplace. This management style and labour control strategies rely on a culturally specific, predominantly male vision of foreign spaces as potentially dangerous (thus, meant only for men to explore) but full of development and profit potential. This conception and representation of space normalised the Chinese male workers’ taken-for-granted

masculine notions about work, including enduring harsh working conditions, occupying high status in the professional hierarchy, and conquering the harsh environment through projects in the Global South.

## Strategies for Transgressing Spatial and Symbolic Boundaries

Despite all this, the women responded to, animated, or contested the fence's symbolic meanings. At times, the women's everyday practices within their confined spaces generated for them a sense of freedom. Though this freedom might have been limited, the women tried to chip away at the divisive rules regulating their work and relationships on the project.

Sinohydro attempted to contain and control the behaviour of its female employees in their professional and everyday lives. In response, Qingli, the first and most experienced interpreter dispatched to work on the CCS Project, vocally contested her place in the company's hierarchy. She was the go-to interpreter for negotiating with Ecuadorian business partners. In 2014, when the time came for annual self-evaluations and nominations for the best staff, Qingli put 'excellent' in her evaluation. She told me:

I've performed the largest volume of translation and interpreting work, but the director in my department suggested that I tune down my evaluation and put [the neutral category] 'qualified' instead. He had already decided to give the award to a newer [female] interpreter who had just taken a month-long vacation and had not worked as hard as I had.

Qingli confronted the director about the decision. The director responded by saying management needed to balance the rewards to protect the new interpreter's motivation.

Operating under the gendered premise that men dominated this field and women needed guidance and protection, management tried to protect the motivation of the Chinese women employees lest they were unable to endure the conditions on an overseas hydroelectric project. But highly qualified employees like Qingli viewed the company's practices as containing their professional achievements—as a reaction to the dreaded possibility that their linguistic and professional capabilities might motivate them to leave to work for other companies in Ecuador. Hand in hand with the control over women in their professional lives, management also regulated their personal lives so their presence would better serve the goals of the company.

This was evident when a male engineer from the company pursued Qingli publicly. After she started dating him, her colleagues, especially management, quickly came to regard the relationship as an officially ordained one. On learning more about the man, Qingli determined that he was not suitable and ended the relationship, but her rejection prompted management to intervene. As Qingli recalled: 'Both my director and manager talked with me, asking whether I was sure about my decision. They were afraid that I might be more attracted to my Ecuadorian co-workers.'

The company's intervention was not a stand-alone incident. As confirmed by other young Chinese employees, the company and older employees viewed romantic relationships between two Chinese colleagues as a sign of loyalty to the company and its values. The expectation was that the couple would feel more bound not only to each other but also to Sinohydro. Despite the company's intervention, Qingli did not change her mind. She later started dating an Ecuadorian interpreter of Chinese descent. The last time I talked with her, she had left Sinohydro and was working for a private Chinese company in Central America.

The green metal fence around their dormitory can be read as the material assurance and marker for the company's control over the women's work and relationships. By claiming that the fence could protect women from male aggression, the company constructed and reinforced an implicitly stereotypical image of aggressive Ecuadorian men to police the behaviour of the Chinese women employees and to encourage them to engage only in 'proper' relationships with appropriate Chinese men. On a deeper level, the regulation of female employees' personal relationships was ultimately aimed at ensuring their sustained work and commitment to the project.

Yet, I observed that the female workers living inside the fence felt more restricted than protected by it. For example, they paid close attention to whether other women returned to the dormitory at night according to the company rule. I was hanging out with Chinese female employees on several occasions when they commented on other Chinese women who failed to observe the dormitory rule. The conversations often escaped beyond the fence and became gossip that singled out or shamed the subjects. Consequently, Chinese women became more discreet and compliant with company rules. Still, there were many ways these women tried to evade the restrictions the fence symbolised.

Jing was a junior interpreter who had been developing a close relationship with a Chinese engineer. Though the company encouraged relationships between Chinese men and women, rumours spread about Jing's 'loose' behaviour because her colleagues believed her relationship had evolved 'too quickly'. Before long, Jing's boyfriend went on his scheduled leave to China. Jing immediately moved out of the dormitory and stayed in her boyfriend's single-room apartment to escape her colleagues' and management's watchful eyes. Jing complained to me:

Personal life here, compared to work, is much less important. We stayed in the office all the time and had no private life ... Unlike men who often went outside to have fun, as a woman, I'm concerned about my safety. I've encountered much harassment from local men who catcalled at us all the time. I ignored them, and they eventually stopped. But the managers are less harsh toward women and our requests [to have more personal space or better living conditions] compared to male colleagues.

By dating the appropriate man, on the surface, Jing satisfied the company's intention to contain women. She also exploited the managerial concern for women's safety to access what she desired, although she did not challenge the premise for such control. Like Jing, many of the women believed the fence did little to protect them from real or imagined dangers in and outside the camp but was a reminder of being under the company's control. They tried to evade symbolic control by engaging in approved behaviours in their relationships while carving out alternative spaces to seek more freedom.

## Spatial Politics and Labour Control

As I have shown, professional rank, class, and gender divisions at the CCS Project site intersected to inform the organisation of space and labour relations. These divisions were symbolised in material contrasts between the apartments and barracks, the fenced-off female dormitory and the rest, constantly reminding people of their place as they carried out their daily activities and moved through the space. Labour control thrived by also regulating employees' social relations and daily practices in space according to management's definition of the appropriate place to be and relationships to have.

Focusing on the spatial design, the fence, and the Chinese employees' responses, I argue that the Chinese transnational company relied on the logic of spatial differentiation and patriarchal social norms to discipline and control their employees' labour processes and produce efficient workers. I have highlighted how the Chinese women perceived and negotiated the built space and responded to the discourses about their skills, romantic relationships, and loyalty. I use these observations to reveal the cultural and labour politics that Chinese transnational projects can engender in their operations in Ecuador.

At the base camp, as in other spaces, the spatial organisation of China's transnational projects reverberated and had a collateral impact on social relationships. These interactions, in turn, shaped the gendered organisation of work while reinforcing labour hierarchies and inequalities. By accounting for the experiences of women living in the space, I show how marginalised actors strategised to transgress those boundaries and contest their assigned places in the hierarchy as they pushed against Chinese transnational capital's labour control practices in the workplace. ●