Great Expectations

The Ambitions of Hong Kong Bankers

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In this talk, I will share one chapter draft from my dissertation with the audience. This chapter explores different facets of ambition among junior Hong Kong bankers, such as their eagerness to learn on the job, their frequent job changes, the shifts of their ambitions over time, and their anxieties of the possibility that their ambitions might never be realized. The chapter also documents a cultural patterning of ambition: while for Mainlander Chinese bankers, many viewed their finance jobs as a staging ground to realize their life goals, Hongkonger Chinese bankers took jobs in finance to provide for themselves or their families. After presenting this finding, I try to situate this difference in the histories of Mainland China and Hong Kong.

The background of this chapter and my broader dissertation is as follows. Since the 2000s, the economic expansion in China has brought ever more Mainland Chinese firms and people to Hong Kong to meet their financial needs. As a result, financial institutions located in the city, such as the Hong Kong offices of North American and European investment banks, have been hiring many Mainland Chinese financiers to serve these Mainland clients, and to ride the wave of China's economic expansion. These Mainland Chinese financiers work together with their Hongkonger Chinese colleagues, and this co-working experience is ethnographically intriguing: while both groups are ethnic Chinese, and both are working in finance, they bring in different sociocultural backgrounds, social networks, and cultural models of both work and the economy. In my dissertation, I explore the ways that these differences played out, and aim to understand the different meanings of capitalism among these two groups.

Monday
June 3, 2013, 12:00-1:05 pm
Conference Room, Building 50, Room 51A

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