

## **A Fieldwork in Pandemic**

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It was a challenging experience to fulfill my fieldwork amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020 when the lockdown was in place. The majority of the work was relocated to individual homes. I had to wait for four long months to reach Shanghai – and was quarantined there for two weeks, before finally setting foot on the streets. Although I had a research plan in place, this period was extremely stressful. I wondered if my project would still be relevant, considering how fast the world was changing. I was constantly learning, unlearning, and relearning new ideas, concepts, theories, etc every day – meaning my pre-pandemic knowledge became either insufficient or obsolete.

I have observed that everyone around me was talking about the “new normal” – however, what exactly entailed “normal”? This has become a point of discussion across societies. Upon reflection, I realized that the best way to understand it would be to experience it first-hand. So I decided to let the site visits transform my dissertation fieldwork instead of a pre-determined action plan. And it did transform, in ways that I could not imagine when I was locked down at home in New York or quarantined in a hotel room in Shanghai.

My fieldwork started in Dongguan, a factory that produces shoes for the international markets. Due to strict regulations in China, life got back to normal quickly, at least on the surface. It was only when I spoke to the factory owner and workers that I realized how the pandemic had a drastic impact on the industry and workers on the assembly line.

Mountains of shoes, tightly packed in boxes with brand logos and client information were laid in the factory’s warehouse. Originally, they were supposed to be shipped, however, the pandemic, especially between April and May 2020, prompted many brands to cancel their orders. At the time, canceling was an easy decision for the brands, meaning the factories had to take the hit. It was impossible for them to close the floors and send workers away. Remember, it was only a month after the outbreak, and the factories were forced to temporarily close for the lockdown.

An eerie silence engulfed the warehouse during this period. When they were finally allowed to reopen, they wanted to break that silence as soon as possible. For them, the quietness of the manufacturing warehouse was the scariest sound of all. Halting the production had a great impact on the supply network, which in turn, affected millions of small businesses, workers, and their families. The factory was forced to restart production, despite not knowing when the orders would resume.

It was only after I tracked down the production network from the factory to a sub-supply chain that I realized how complicated making a shoe is. On a factory floor, where more than seventy workers were lined up on assembly lines, shoe production included more than 150 steps, over half of which were outsourced to small workshops and businesses. That's why, even though the orders were canceled, the process of manufacturing, which started long ago could not be stopped without paying a heavy cost. It was a difficult decision for everyone on the production side, as they were the ones paying.

Despite the legal contracts being in place, the brands' decision to not take the shoes was final, and the factory was left with no compensation. Such a non-negotiable power dynamic between two ends, brand and factory, meant that the factory was between a rock and hard place. As a result, boxes were in the warehouse until the end of 2020 before the factory finally decided to sell them to a middle carrier who only paid half of the production cost. Those shoes may appear in your local market with a discount that you can't resist, however, behind that discount is a network of disappointed suppliers.

This one factory's struggle illustrated the changes that were coming to all factories, accelerated by the pandemic. For many low-end manufacturers, production may never recover to pre-pandemic levels. In fact, many factories have closed, falling silent overnight, factory floors becoming empty, and the assembly lines covered in dust. The workers were laid off, forcing them to relocate to another factory. The global supply chain is further fragmented by the double threat of, both production relocation and closures forced by outbreaks. Interviewees from the industry have shown great concerns about the traditional relationship between market and production since the early 2010s, and the outbreak was the final straw in that relationship.

It was crucial for insiders who were aware of the changes ahead to act. How? By shifting their role from a producer, who listened to the brand – to an actor, who directly worked with the customer. Moreover, it was crucial for them to work together, rather than in silos – thereby strengthening the broader supply chain. A quick change in attitude was observed and action was taken almost collectively in the shoe production industry. A factory was no longer seen as just a factory. It had become a shared network of factories corresponding to each other in the Great Bay Area.

ZG-1558, an order of around 300 pairs of shoes, is produced in more than 10 factories and workshops, which employed anywhere from 2 to 100 workers. The pandemic accelerated the acceptance of extended networks in production, which is no longer a cluster – a geographical and linear-based network suggested by the Global Supply Chain. In March 2021, I traveled to villages in rural regions to visit shoe workshops, where most of the workers were local villagers who worked in the coastal-city factories for decades. They decided to stay home and become an extension of production in their villages. If it were previous generations, these workers would

have lived off the land, however today, they are seen participating in globalism from their homes. Such a transformation began way before the pandemic, however, the scale and impact of the outbreak had the industry join together with a collective agreement on how the future could be. The bottom line is that COVID-19 has changed the conventional way of consuming, producing, and living on the assembly line, especially in the production sector in China. With the interview and observations I collected during the fieldwork, my dissertation is undergoing a close examination of the transformation in the production sector, understanding its social and political impact.