

# **A Theory Of Subsidiary Operations: System, Societal and Dominance Effects Revisited**

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## **Abstract**

The article develops a systematic theory of the nature of work in the international workplace. It reports the research of a forthcoming book (*Assembling Work*) in which the authors have used research on five Japanese manufacturing plants in Britain to address contemporary debates about the role of inward investing firms as carriers of foreign or global corporate best practices. The theoretical framework for the analysis of social action within these workplaces stresses the influence of dominant models of work organisation, national institutional practices and underlying capitalist social relations. This approach highlights the constraints as well as the opportunities facing managers of our mainly greenfield workplaces, the ways in which management-worker relations remained exigent over time, and the debates and uncertainties that continued to characterise the development of management strategies. The paper challenges accounts of the transfer or hybridisation of Japanese production techniques and develops an alternative theory of the nature of work in the international firm. This emphasises the active remaking of production and employment regimes in specific corporate and local contexts that are themselves framed by a complex of global, national and underlying political-economic social forces. Managers efforts to construct distinctive work regimes are influenced by branch plant mandates and competencies, varied product and labour market contexts and the evolving character of management-worker relations within the factory. The approach we take emphasises the importance of human agency and the conscious remaking of work relations within workplaces that are influenced by local and national institutions, such as local labour markets and the role of the state, and transnational forces, such as multinational companies and their ability to move production and employees internationally.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the implications of the analytical framework of system, societal and dominance effects for our approach to subsidiary operations (Smith and Meiksins 1995; Smith and Elger 2000; Smith 2004). More especially, we connect the framework to the dominant images of subsidiaries that have been used to capture linkages and power relations between home and host societies, namely that of the transplant, hybrid and branch plant. The specificity of international firms as conduits for transfer needs some emphasis, as this form is different from transfer through professional associations, individual mobility or state-sponsored commissions. Foreign direct investment (FDI) is the dominant means of technology transfer, and offers a richer potential medium for both explicit and tacit knowledge management, learning and institutional benchmarking of ideas and best practices. This is because human labour is more actively embedded in a practical task environment. Firms as capitalist institutions share commonality of purpose, inputs and definite social relations between labour and capital. Therefore we need to acknowledge these systemic or universal elements in any transfer debate where the unit of transfer is the capitalist firm. However 'corporate effects' are necessarily institutionalised within particular societies and transfer between societies through the transnational firm cannot be identical, given the separation and competition between private capitals. Furthermore, firms from the same national territory, while sharing a common heritage, are also differentiated through capitalist competitive relations as well as a number of structural contingencies, such as sector, size, and position within the supply chain.

Such sub-national effects are further complicated by the fact that host society is not a uniform but heterogeneous context. For our purposes this is manifest in the receptivity of different regions towards FDI, and the patterning of FDI clustering, which in our case studies, meant 'locality effects' of a new town setting. Finally, structures and contexts cannot in themselves predict or determine outcomes within the autonomous space of the factory as workplace. Social relations *between* specific groups and individual managers and workers; and *within* groups of workers and managers animate, articulate and interpret structure and selectively filter context in novel and therefore unanticipated and autonomous ways. Hence, our approach has been to suggest that while capitalist social relations operate at different levels and spaces, these are always human and historical processes. In line with a critical realist approach (Pratten 1993; Ackroyd and Fleetwood 2000) it is our analysis of these features of social process and social context, that provide a basis for developing a more adequate theoretical understanding of the operations of Japanese, and indeed other, international manufacturing subsidiaries.

By way of critique of convergence/divergence dichotomies within comparative organisational analysis, the *system, society and dominance effects* model argues that international workplaces reflect a three-way interaction of contextual and interest group effects from different structural sources. This triple determination is given by political economy or mode of production ('system effects'); unique national institutions, cultures and histories ('societal effects'); and the diffusion of best practices or modernisation strategies by the 'society-in-dominance' at any particular period of global competition, such as the US or Japan in recent years ('dominance effects'). This model grew out of comparative research on the engineering profession (Smith, 1990; Smith and Meiksins, 1995), and was extended through our research on Japanese transplants in Britain (Smith and Elger; 1997; 2000). The model is an attempt to create a dynamic, synthetic and integrated approach to cross-national organisation analysis, and was built upon and reacted to the work of Child (1981) and Lane (1989).

The model argues that the international firm will be a site for the social interaction of three forces, and not simply a universal set of economically 'efficient' organisational practices versus a local set of institutional rules, customs, laws and relations. The nature of work within the modern international organisation is more complex than global-local, universal-national, and convergence-divergences dichotomies. The research reported in our forthcoming book and briefly sketched in this paper, highlights the agency of the subsidiary in managing its environment, as well as the constraints from the parent company, capital-labour dynamics and the particular conditions within national and local institutional environment which actors within the firm enact and are shaped by. Our approach supports the work of others (Clark and Mueller 1996), who have tried to interrogate the action of the large firm within the context of societal constraints, developing what Mayer and Whittington (1999: 936) call a 'reflexive recombination of local and international practices'. Therefore, our approach to Japanese subsidiaries in Britain supports the agency of the firm in *shaping* and not simply carrying its institutional heritage or location context.

**FIGURE 1 THE SYSTEM, SOCIETY AND DOMINANCE MODEL  
[HERE]**

The analytical framework of system, societal and dominance effects grew out of an engagement with recent institutionalist analyses of national production regimes or business systems, rather than a specific discussion of the operations of international firms. However, placing such operations in their wider contexts provides a valuable vantage point from which to review our overall argument about the operations of Japanese manufacturing subsidiaries in the UK and underline the broader implications of our analysis for the theorising the operations of overseas manufacturing subsidiaries more generally.

Our first argument is that any discussion of the transmission of dominant home country recipes from parent to foreign subsidiaries, or of the development of hybrid policies which meld together home and host country influences, must give particular attention to the ways in which specific subsidiaries are positioned within the wider corporate strategies of their parent firms. Corporate ‘effects’ are important because ostensibly ‘national’ models and related claims to dominance are developed within specific sectors and firms, and are accorded more or less relevance for specific subsidiaries according to the particular roles that they expected to play within their parent companies. Corporate effects are also important because they involve rather different networks of resources and power relations within and across firms. In turn these condition the activities of subsidiary managers and mediate the implications of a variety of home and host management repertoires (and here the role of sister plants underlines the potential salience of other developments beyond specific home and host countries). Finally, insofar as the emergent corporate strategies and policy repertoires developed by competitor firms, or in rival sectors or national economies, undermines the existing strategies of parent firms, this is indirectly likely to increase the vulnerability of its subsidiary operations. This may be construed as a systemic tendency of corporate rivalry to problematise existing national business systems, even those with current claims to dominance. But it is important to recognise that such tendencies (exemplified in our research by the increasing location of competitor and sister subsidiaries in China) ramify through the global capitalist system in heavily mediated and uneven ways.

Our second argument is that, wherever inward investors are located, the management of the labour process and the regulation of labour are likely to pose significant problems for management. Neither headquarters nor subsidiaries managers are likely to discover the perfect location or the perfect supports for management hegemony. However, the specific tensions and challenges that managers will confront will be strongly influenced by the specific institutional arrangements and class and gender compromises that characterise particular districts, regions or countries, that is by differentiated host country effects. Again, as labour process theorists have persistently argued, the underlying intractability of labour may be regarded as a systemic feature of capitalist employment relations. However, our research also helps to document the particular forms and limits of such intractability within a relatively open and supportive locality within the contradictory and evolving British production regime (Rubery 1994; Rubery and Grimshaw 2003). It is plausible to argue that such localities are becoming more common, as national states pursue policies of

liberalisation and flexibilisation and international companies gain more options for relocation of their production operations. In this sense system dynamics driven by both states and corporations are recasting and also weakening country effects, making it more likely that the challenges facing management will take the form of an increased volatility of labour and disorganised discontent, rather than organised challenges and compromises. At the same time, however, it should also be recognised that the specific forms taken by greenfield sites and flexibilised local labour markets continue to vary substantially. Those in the interstices of leading capitalist economies (parts of the UK), those on the less developed periphery of core capitalist regions (say in Mexico or eastern Europe) and those in the export processing zones of hybrid system (capitalist/state socialist) developing countries (say in Vietnam or South China) each have distinctive characteristics. In this sense country effects continue to play a significant role in constituting the terrain on which even the more mobile international subsidiaries may operate.

Finally our third argument is that, in consequence of the above, the policy repertoires and management practices in specific subsidiaries necessarily develop through micropolitical processes of management debate, alliance and conflict and inevitably involve tacit but somewhat contested bargains with employees. These processes are clearly framed within the wider parameters of distinctive corporate structures, strategies and power relations on the one hand, and the local and national institutional structuring of labour markets on the other. However, our empirical research suggests that these processes absorb much of the energy and constitute much of the immediate experience of the managers and workers who work at these subsidiaries. We would also argue that these processes are often more complex than is recognised. They rarely involve a simple clash between say, Japanese and British managers and they often sustain patterns of conflict and co-operation between managers and workers that cannot simply be read off from broader relations of power and dependency. Throughout the empirical analysis of our forthcoming book, and briefly reported below, we have sought to capture these complexities of lived experience whilst locating them within an understanding of the wider structures and power relations discussed in this conclusion.

### **Organisational structures and management processes**

Our research has emphasised the ways in which existing templates and repertoires of work organisation and employment relations, from whatever source, have been actively modified and reworked in efforts to bring them to bear upon the organisation of work and management-worker relations within the subsidiaries we studied. On this basis we have developed an account of the varied social processes of interpretation, negotiation and often contestation through which both production arrangements and employment relations have been constructed and reconstructed within these workplaces. Such an emphasis arises readily out of detailed empirical research but some may be tempted to treat these processes as incidental to the overall patterns of relationships and activities that are sustained within these factories. Our argument, however, is that they are intrinsic to the operation of such subsidiaries as they underline the problematical character of management, not only in regard to workers and the labour process but also in terms of relations between subsidiaries and their parent firms and wider commercial pressures and exigencies.

**TABLE 1 PROFILE OF CASE STUDY FIRMS AND INTERIEWS  
[HERE]**

All of the factories that we studied (see Table 1) were established in localities that appeared to give managers considerable leverage in developing work and employment relations as they saw fit. Telford, a new town in the English Midlands, in particular, was characterised by supportive local state policies and high levels of unemployment at the time when most of these firms arrived, while all of the companies have pursued successful policies of union avoidance. In this sense our research sites were biased in the direction of conditions that could facilitate the exercise of management prerogatives and the transfer of parent company practices to subsidiaries. Nevertheless, our analysis has drawn attention to a range of problems and uncertainties that beset management policy formation and implementation in each of the factories. In turn, as chapter ten shows, responses to these dilemmas and challenges grew out of varied patterns of debate, alliance and conflict among managers in these subsidiaries and in their parent firms, the outcomes of which were influenced by the different priorities, resources and powers of the protagonists.

The recruitment, retention, control and motivation of shop-floor workers represented a major focus of management concern across our case-studies, and in this sense labour was an active influence on the making and remaking of work and employment relations within these subsidiaries despite the absence of any collective voice. However, the intractability of labour was not the only source of uncertainties for the managers of these subsidiaries. Others included the problematical relevance of aspects of the established production or design repertoires of parent companies, which arose as much from the commercial role and environment of specific subsidiaries as from the distinctive localities and labour markets in which they operated.

Of course, attention to the micropolitics of management and the tacit negotiation of relations between management and employees has to be placed in the wider context of corporate and competitive relations on the one hand and the social organisation of local and national labour markets on the other. Corporate policies beyond the subsidiary, at regional or corporate headquarters, clearly had a major impact upon the micropolitics of the workplace. Thus our research has documented the ways in which wider corporate decisions on such matters as the terms of new investments, the allocation of new product lines or wider corporate rationalisation influenced the fate of local operations. At this point we have to recognise an important limitation that accompanies the strengths of detailed case-study research at workplace level, namely that we have not explored such wider social processes and power relations in the same way as those within the case-study plants. As Burawoy (1998) emphasises in his discussion of the extended case-study method, such research focuses upon the social dynamics within the case, and can only treat the wider social context in more summary structural terms, though other studies would reveal the active processes through which such structures are themselves constituted.

In constructing our understanding of these wider relations, however, we have drawn particularly on the accounts and understandings of our subsidiary managers. We recognise that such managers have a partial and selective view of policies and politics

in the higher reaches of their parent firms, just as top managers have an incomplete understanding of developments within their subsidiaries (Rubery and Grimshaw 2003: 218-9). Nevertheless, they can be expected to have a well-developed, though partisan, understanding of the pressures that impinge on them. With these qualifications in mind, our case-studies document four important features of the relationship between headquarters and overseas operations, which we will return to later in this paper. Firstly, the subsidiaries we studied were located within rather different corporate structures and their roles were defined in terms of distinctive corporate strategies, and these features made a significant difference to their operations. Secondly, these different roles not only involved different relations with head-quarters and 'parent plants' in Japan but also distinctive relationships with overseas 'sister plants', suppliers, customers and competitors. Thirdly there were critical junctures when top corporate policies overrode the concerns of subsidiary managers, most obviously when decisions were made to close plants but to some extent also when key investment decisions were made or particular performance targets were defined. Finally, however, within these parameters subsidiary managers nevertheless had a significant degree of autonomy, as they actively engaged with, interpreted and negotiated the implications of top corporate policies, including those that substantially constrained their room for manoeuvre.

### **Transplants, hybrids, branch-plants**

What, then, are the implications of our analysis for such standard models of the international subsidiary as the transplant, the hybrid and the branch-plant? We will consider each of these models in terms of the claims they make about both the character of workplace social processes and the wider structures of social relations that impinge on these processes. The first image, that of the transplant, was widely used in the 1980s and 1990s, especially to characterise Japanese inward investors. This imagery implied that such enterprises would seek to transfer an unproblematically superior portfolio of Japanese management and production techniques quite directly from home factories to overseas subsidiaries, while any failure of such transfer was to be explained in terms of the obstacles that arose in alien social environments.

## **FIGURE TWO TRANSPLANTS, HYBRIDS AND BRANCH PLANTS [HERE]**

### **Transplants**

In some of our case-studies, certainly, established repertoires of production organisation, often drawn from influential home country models, were likely to represent central resources and reference points for key actors. In conditions where leading enterprises in the home economy were regarded as successful exponents of contemporary 'best practice', while host country practices were viewed as backward and unsuccessful, such dominant models influenced not only corporate headquarters and expatriate managers but also locally recruited managers and possibly shop-floor workers.

Our findings, however, underline the contingent and contested, rather than general and accepted, relevance and impact of such established corporate repertoires. Firstly, our

case study enterprises differed markedly in the degree to which, and the ways in which, existing Japanese production or design operations were seen as models for the subsidiary. In this regard they could be ordered on a spectrum, from Parts-co, where parent plant practices were most closely emulated, through PCB-co and Copy-co, to Assembly-co and finally Computer-co, where an Anglo-American design and development paradigm was a more dominant reference point. Our research suggests that these differences in the salience of parent company recipes can be explained partly in terms of the role of the subsidiary in wider corporate strategies. For example, among the larger parent firms Electrical-co clearly sought to acquire key design and development competencies from Computer-co, its British subsidiary and this reduced the salience of its existing expertise for the British operation. Meanwhile Parts-co sought to provide Europe-based motor manufacturers with an equivalent service to that provided to major customers in Japan, making its home model directly relevant. Again, amongst the smaller companies the relevance of Japanese models of best practice was seen differently at PCB-co and at Assembly-co. At the latter the limited production experience of the parent company combined with the priority of servicing major customers to provide considerable latitude for British production managers to go their own way. At the former the established production expertise of the parent company was drawn upon in increasingly contentious circumstances.

Secondly, in each case the salience of parent company practices (and indeed those drawn from sister subsidiaries or domestic companies) had to be worked out in detail among expatriate and local managers within the subsidiary, albeit influenced by varied levels of guidance and pressure emanating from above. The imputation of 'dominance' to leading sectors or whole national economies may be seductive, not only for commentators but also for some of the participants in transnational operations. But such *rhetorics* of dominance still had to be translated into concrete forms of work organisation and employment relations, and it was at this point that the ramifications of specific product and labour market conditions became pertinent. The terms of debate about these matters varied across our case study factories, as did the related evolution of work and employment policies. At Copy-co, for example, the mix and scale of production, the existing skills, experience and orientations of the workforce, and related calculations regarding the balance of capital investment and labour deployment were all implicated in the tailoring of production arrangements in terms of such features as foolproofing and job rotation. The implications of these circumstances were explored in arguments and discussions among management specialisms and factions with variable leverage at different levels in the firm, while the initiatives and responses of employees also had an indirect influence on the outcomes. In these respects 'transplantation' was inevitably a dynamic and contested process.

At the same time there were important differences between the case-studies in the patterns of management micropolitics through which these matters were addressed, and in the weight given to these different 'contingencies' in the resulting management policies. To understand these differences we need to attend not only to the dynamics of social organisation within the plant but to the wider field of forces within which each plant operated. Thus our engagement with the model of the transplant highlights two key arguments that must be carried forward to develop a more adequate theory of the operations of international subsidiaries. The first is that subsidiaries vary in the

roles they play within broader corporate structures and this makes a difference to the presumed pertinence of purportedly dominant home country production repertoires. The second is that efforts to draw upon such home country and parent company repertoires inevitably involve debate and tailoring to address the specific commercial and labour market circumstances surrounding the operation of the subsidiary factory. Thus the positioning of the factory within wider corporate structures and strategies, the micropolitical negotiation of the implications of existing management repertoires within the enterprise, and specific product and labour market exigencies are all implicated in the active making of production and employment relations within these overseas subsidiaries, in ways that are neglected by the image of the transplant.

## **Hybrids**

The second image, developed from the late 1990s onwards, is that of the hybrid factory. This metaphor has emphasised the mixing of home and host influences to produce a distinctive set of organisational and production relations, not only in specific subsidiaries and settings but also in the operations of indigenous competitors. Our analysis has important affinities with the image of hybridisation, because it problematises transplantation and does not treat host country conditions merely as an obstacle to the adoption of home country practices. The notion of hybridisation is not only popular but also rather ambiguous. At one extreme it has simply been used to label the incomplete and diluted character of transplantation, but at the other extreme it has been used to focus on the emergence of new configurations of work and employment relations that may represent viable competitors to existing dominant models. At their best, then, analyses of hybridisation have moved beyond the juxtaposition of home and host country effects, to emphasise the evolution of branch plant operations over time and the emergence of distinctive configurations that may depart from both home-based templates and local practices (Boyer, 1998; Liker et al 1999).

One way in which such a process of hybridisation has been conceptualised has been in terms of the dynamics of 'organisational learning' that may guide the evolution of branch plant practices. However, much of the literature on organisational learning mixes analytical arguments and prescriptive recommendations in an uneasy fashion. For example, the work of Beechler, Bird and Taylor (1998) maps a range of trajectories of organisational learning within the overseas affiliates of Japanese firms, and usefully identifies some of the influences on the evolution of these patterns. However, they ultimately celebrate one such trajectory, characterised by an 'open hybrid' form that facilitates the explication of tacit knowledge and the reflexive reassessment of the principles of corporate operations. This form, they argue, 'identifies problems more quickly, while problems are still in gestation ... is highly proactive, characterised by constant fine tuning ... exhibits a willingness to learn from local sources ... and often enthusiastic about sharing what they have learned with others' (Beechler et al 1998: 353).

However, it is unclear how this idealised form relates to their documentation of the much more problematical and contested character of much organisational learning in their own research. For example, they recognised that 'cycles of learning' were often interrupted, so that mistakes were repeated or innovations aborted prematurely.

Further, changing circumstances easily rendered earlier solutions problematical, so that 'usually such shifts caught the affiliate off guard, making the subsequent adjustment traumatic' (Beechler et al 1998: 357). Another limitation is that such analyses often work with a *unitarist* conception of the enterprise, in which effective forms of organisational learning offer appropriate joint benefits to all participants. This glosses over enduring conflicts of class interest between management and workers as well as divergences in the status concerns and priorities of different segments and levels of management. Our case-studies offer a very different perspective on 'organisational learning' because they highlight the uncertainties, contradictions, conflicts and limitations that characterise management policy formation and enactment, within the constraints surrounding such international subsidiaries. In this sense, our analyses seek to provide a more critical account of the micropolitics of management policy making and the problematical character of organisational learning in such settings.

From this vantage point the modification and melding of policy repertoires indicated by the concept of hybridisation is inevitably characterised both by competing claims to expertise and by dilemmas and difficulties in deploying these forms of expertise. In this context British and Japanese managers typically claimed different *sources* of expertise: Japanese managers in most of the firms could draw upon strong claims to technical expertise grounded in existing corporate activities, while British managers invariably claimed particular expertise in managing a British labour force. However, in neither instance could the effectiveness of such claims be taken for granted and their leverage varied between firms and over time. Japanese claims to technical expertise varied in their potency depending upon the specific role of the subsidiary and the related implications of British product and labour markets. Meanwhile the persistence of problems of recruitment and retention weakened the efficacy of British management claims. Thus an adequate theory of subsidiary operations cannot be based on an idealised account of the emergence of new hybrid production and employment regimes (or indeed a simply negative account of dilution) but must address the conflicts and uncertainties that commonly characterise evolving subsidiary operations.

As this discussion implies, such analyses of the micropolitics of hybridisation must also address the varied structures, resources and power relations within which such fraught forms of organisational learning have developed. Our research has documented a range of organisational locations and exchanges that may influence policy debates. These include circulating expatriate managers, local management visits to Japanese parent factories, problem-solving teams called in from Japan, exchanges of information and experience with sister subsidiaries in other countries, discussions with other local Japanese firms, and finally comparisons with the practices of other firms operating in the UK. Among other examples, these various contacts have mediated the transfer of foolproofing ideas from Japan by Copy-co; the deployment of quality procedures at PCB-co; the borrowing of consultative arrangements from the US sister plant by Parts-co and the influence of practices elsewhere in the UK on development of teamworking at Copy-co. Indeed, in our two major assembly plants, Copy-co and Parts-co, the dominance of the Japanese parent firm and the presumed superiority of their production practices did not preclude lateral borrowing or even, in the case of Copy-co, some modest reverse transfer (Edwards

2004). Meanwhile at Computer-co a central rationale of the take-over was reverse learning, if not transfer.

However, different subsidiaries are differently located in relation to both the extent of such networks and the power relations that characterise them. Thus the larger subsidiaries can draw upon a more developed international management cadre, a wider range of sister plants and more sustained contacts with cluster firms. By comparison the major influences on the smaller subsidiaries tend to be a limited number of parent or sister plants and pressures emanating from customer firms. Even in the larger firms, though, such networks also involve hierarchies of power, with headquarters as the dominant partner, sister subsidiaries as more equal partners and other firms having potential influence rather than direct leverage. Thus at Parts-co and to a lesser extent at Copy-co the parent company could call upon a cadre of committed expatriate managers who had experience of managing international operations. At both they could encourage expatriate and local managers to draw upon recipes and comparisons across parent and sister plants in developing initiatives within specific workplaces, and they could both use funding decisions and performance criteria to guide management priorities. Both borrowing from sister plants and instances of reverse transfer took place within these parameters, though this also involved scope for subsidiary managers to make a case for the value of their own policy preferences within this framework.

Patterns and processes of hybridisation were not simply guided by top management imperatives, not least because they were also influenced by relatively intractable features of existing work and employment relations in the workplace and the local labour market. Nevertheless our case-studies emphasise that the evolution of 'hybrid' policy repertoires within these subsidiaries was strongly influenced by distinctive organisational networks and power relations, especially within the management structures of the parent firms. In this sense they give support to the argument that corporate organisation is often a strong mediator of both home and host country effects (Ferner and Quintanilla 1998; Rubery and Grimshaw 2003), undermining any analysis of hybridisation as the direct product of the interaction between such effects. Thus the notion of hybridisation may represent a valuable starting point for developing a theoretical understanding of the operations of international subsidiaries, but key features of the dynamics of subsidiary operations risk being obscured by this metaphor. In particular we need to recognise the contested and problematical character of emergent policy repertoires and to locate the micropolitical processes of management policy formation within varied and unequal networks of influence and corporate power relations.

### **Branch-plants**

The third image of the subsidiary, that of the branch-plant, returns to debates of the 1970s and 1980s about the overseas operations of international firms. This metaphor was developed to emphasise the subordinate role of subsidiary operations within wider corporate structures and strategies orchestrated from the centre. It was also intended to highlight the dependency of regions and localities upon precarious sources of employment because of the capacity of inward investors to shift their operations and investments from place to place. Our research has drawn upon this imagery to

underline the importance of the specific roles played by the various factories within their parent firms and the importance of top corporate decision-making at critical junctures in both the expansion and closure of such plants. In line with the literature on branch plants, we have also argued that the efforts of national and local states to capture such inward manufacturing investment have often created clusters of routine assembly operations. These have been characterised by the preponderance of low skilled and low paid jobs, with the implication that such operations are relatively easily closed and relocated.

However, our analyses have also shown that the specific roles of the different subsidiaries have differed significantly in ways that are not readily accommodated within the branch plant imagery. One way in which to move away from an undifferentiated branch plant model is to draw on the various typologies which have been developed of different types of enterprise structures and strategies associated with international investment. In recent years distinctions have often been made between multi-domestic, multi-national, international, transnational and global companies, and such typologies alert us to a spectrum of different relations between headquarters and subsidiaries (Dicken 1998). However their immediate utility is weakened by inconsistencies in the characterisation of these different sorts of enterprise and by the conflation of analytical and prescriptive categories (especially in discussions of the global networked firm). Furthermore, different subsidiaries of a parent company may actually occupy rather different positions in relation to that parent. This was particularly evident in our research in the cases of PCB-co (which was quite untypical as a sub-contractor subsidiary of the parent company) and Computer-co (which was untypical in being designated as a product champion in an area of parent company weakness).

Thus, rather than map our cases in terms of such standard typologies it is more useful to locate them at a lower level of abstraction, in terms of the specific rationales informing their formation as subsidiaries and the distinctive relationships that have developed between them and their headquarters, sister companies and the like. For all of our firms the establishment of their operations was primarily an exercise in building *market access*, rather than delivering immediate profits to the parent company, and this appears to have framed initial relationships with corporate headquarters. However, the implications of this priority were interpreted differently in different firms and over time, in ways which were related to the distinctive product markets and relationships with customers and competitors that each company and subsidiary faced. In this regard the concept of the production chain (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994) offers some illumination, as it highlights the salience of distinctions between final assemblers and various tiers of component suppliers, though it does not provide a full characterisation of the relationships involved.

The three larger companies each performed distinctive roles within their parent firms. Computer-co was distinctive as a subsidiary in that it was intended to provide the parent company with a capability in the design and production of a specific product range where that company's domestic efforts had earlier been unsuccessful. Copy-co was the final assembler of major lines for the European region in a relatively managed market where leasing of complex equipment enhanced scope for profitable sales of consumables, so that local content to underpin market access continued to be an

important imperative. We can characterise the position of Parts-co as the key European regional supplier of a dominant Japanese first-tier components firm, supplying to a highly competitive customers constituted by substantial and often demanding motor industry norms. The remaining two factories were both smaller sub-contractors, more vulnerable to pressures from both their customer firms and competitor suppliers. However, Assembly-co gained a degree of protection from its possession of an unexpired patent and its close relationship with one major customer, while PCB-co occupied the most precarious position as an outrider operation facing direct competition from East Asian factories. Though these varied features are not readily reduced to a simple continuum, our argument is that an understanding of the different ways in which inward-investing subsidiaries are located in these terms is essential to any broader theoretical understanding of the operations and employment relations within such workplaces.

In particular, it is important to locate any discussion of the performance criteria that regulate the relationships between parents and subsidiaries in these terms. In two of our cases, those of Computer-co and PCB-co, the parent company eventually closed the subsidiary, after each operated for about ten years. In each of these cases the closure decision reflected wider pressures that encouraged corporate rationalisation and changed the calculus that was applied to the performance of the subsidiary, rather than a distinct change in that performance itself. In other respects, however, the cases differed. At Computer-co there had been a long-term commitment to investment in a loss-making but innovative enterprise in the hope of developing a viable competitive presence in the PC market, albeit from a marginal and relatively vulnerable position. However, this commitment was curtailed by a wider crisis of corporate profitability arising from changes in other segments of the parent firm's operations and it was this that precipitated closure. By contrast, at PCB-co an initial tolerance of poor financial performance was underpinned by the prospect of developing business with customers of the parent company, because of the requirements for local content in their overseas operations. However, the relaxation of such regulatory requirements and changes in the sourcing policies of these customers undercut these prospects and exposed the factory more directly to competition from China. As a result the parent company imposed increasingly stringent performance targets and these led to closure. By comparison the three remaining companies sustained 'good enough' production in the circumstances of their different corporate and commercial settings, though none did this on the basis of a high commitment, high performance workplace. In this context subsidiary managers often sought to consolidate the position of 'their' factories within wider corporate strategies both by seeking to extend the capabilities of the enterprise and bidding for new investment. While their scope for doing this was limited by the evolving character of wider corporate strategies, in each case they gained scope for further investments or new product lines, sufficient to sustain production at Copy-co and Assembly-co and to continue expansion at Parts-co. As such the sunk costs invested in these firms, and particularly in the larger assemblers became substantial, though this did not fully guarantee their longer-term performance and viability.

A further implication of the imagery of the branch plant concerns the leverage that location and relocation can provide for management over the workforce. Here, however, our research findings drawn from the Telford cluster are somewhat paradoxical, because they bring out some of the problems as well as the advantages of

greenfield locations and deregulated labour markets from the point of view of management. As we showed elsewhere (also Elger and Smith 1998; Smith and Elger 1997), conditions in the new town amplified wider features of the 'deregulation' of the labour market and the fragmentation of industrial relations regimes in Britain during the late twentieth century. This provided an attractive site for the location of international inward investors such as our Japanese firms. In turn this created a distinctive set of relations among such firms, based primarily on consultation and concertation in managing the local labour market, rather than the dense linkages between inward investing assemblers and lower tier suppliers that would be characteristic of an integrated production complex. It was in this sense, of mutual learning and active but negotiated employment policy concertation, that these firms constituted a distinctive cluster of Japanese firms.

Of course, our four case-studies in Telford provide only a partial vantage point for any overall characterisation of the operations of Japanese firms in this setting or any general analysis of the structure and dynamics of the local labour market. We have not conducted an ecological study of the growth (or decline) of a full range of subsidiaries in the area, or a sample survey of employees' experiences in any segment of the local labour market. Nevertheless, we have been able to provide a systematic account of how managers and employees in four rather different Japanese subsidiaries perceived and experienced options, dilemmas and constraints in this locality. We were also able to access their perceptions of other Japanese employers as many of our informants had worked in different Japanese firms, as well as their perceptions of the other employers within the wider labour market. Through these mental maps and experiential rankings, we have been able to get an understanding to the local labour market beyond our immediate case studies. Overwhelmingly, these accounts (together with those of other key informants) converged on a shared understanding of key features of the labour market, relations between firms and the policy options of Japanese subsidiaries in this locality. In this sense our four case-studies offer an unequivocal understanding of the social dynamics of a significant segment of the Telford labour market and an important cluster of Japanese inward investors, as well as a broader borrowed insights into the town's labour market.

There were a variety of incentives for Japanese companies to locate in Telford, including new factory sites, good communications links and the presence of existing Japanese companies. However, the most obvious attraction, emphasised by the local state, was a plentiful supply of relatively cheap labour for routine manufacturing work, while trade unions were relatively quiescent and themselves eager to encourage inward investment. These features promised to facilitate the construction of management's preferred production and employment regimes, and throughout the period of our research the firms were able to retain favourable wage rates and avoid unionisation. However, managers discovered that the regulation of labour remained more intractable than they had expected. Labour turnover was often substantial, workers were often sceptical about management strategies for worker involvement, and recruitment became difficult as the pace of inward investment and expansion led to a tighter labour market. In some respects these subsidiaries became locked into this pattern. The larger firms sought to sustain their position by collaborating in efforts to manage the local labour market, both by discouraging the movement of labour between their firms and setting guidelines for wage and non-wage costs, while the

smaller firms were vicarious participants in the resultant policies. However, this had the consequence of limiting the options of individual subsidiaries in terms of pay rates and to some extent personnel policies. It also encouraged such policies as reliance upon the 'foolproofing' of semi-skilled jobs.

For workers the arrival of Japanese inward investors provided increasing job opportunities in an initially slack labour market. This was a particular attraction to older workers who had experienced redundancy from better paying jobs or those who had worked in more poorly paid service sector work, especially when accompanied by promises of enhanced job security. At the same time the demands of routine factory work coupled with modest wages also fed employee grievances. In the absence of effective voice mechanisms exit in search of modest improvements became a common response, especially for younger or more skilled workers who could be more confident about gaining another job elsewhere. Indeed quitting remained a persistent option of last resort even when workforces became somewhat more stabilised, and as such the possibility remained an implicit basis for informal bargaining over work rates and working conditions in each of these workplaces. In these circumstances selective management efforts to develop enhanced forms of worker involvement through quality circle initiatives tended to be experienced as superficial and inconsistent. And in the more stringent work regimes they were also seen as a further imposition in the context of an already inequitable effort bargain.

Managers in the larger firms could nevertheless gain greater commitment by offering opportunities to progress up internal job ladders, but the attractions of these aspects of employment were qualified by the work pressures involved (especially at Parts-co) and by the perceived unfairness of management's criteria for progression (especially at Copy-co). Such moves to manage internal job ladders were accompanied by a variety of personnel initiatives, such as broadening recruitment, bussing in workers and prioritising attendance in bonus calculations. Each of these gave a distinctive inflection to management-worker relations, but none overcame a primarily *instrumental* orientation among workers or fully stabilised the workforce. Thus these features highlight some real limits to management hegemony in these workplaces, notwithstanding the leverage afforded by greenfield investment and concertation between enterprises. Workers remained heavily reliant on these firms for relatively secure manufacturing employment, while a combination of management policies, differentiation and divisions among workers and limited trade union initiatives left them with minimal scope for collective voice. Nevertheless, moves between firms, instrumental responses to management policies and informal bargaining over the pace of work set significant limits to management power, a feature underlined by the pressures and sensitivities involved in the work of team-leaders and supervisors.

Clearly, managers in the subsidiaries we studied were in key respects subordinate to the wider policies of senior management, while the factory managers had considerable power resources in managing their workforces. In these respects the branch plant model represents an important corrective to characterisations of processes of transplantation or hybridisation that abstract from such power relations. However, our case-studies also suggest that the leverage of subsidiary management vis-à-vis headquarters vary significantly according to the specific location and role of the subsidiary within wider corporate strategies as these evolve over time. Furthermore,

even in favourable circumstances the regulation of labour and especially the mobilisation of worker co-operation may remain in important respects problematical. Thus a full theory of subsidiary operations must address these features and overcome these limitations of the branch plant model as well as developing the features we have highlighted in our critical engagement with the transplant and hybrid models.

A summary of the types of characterisation of the case studies explored above is provided in Table 2.

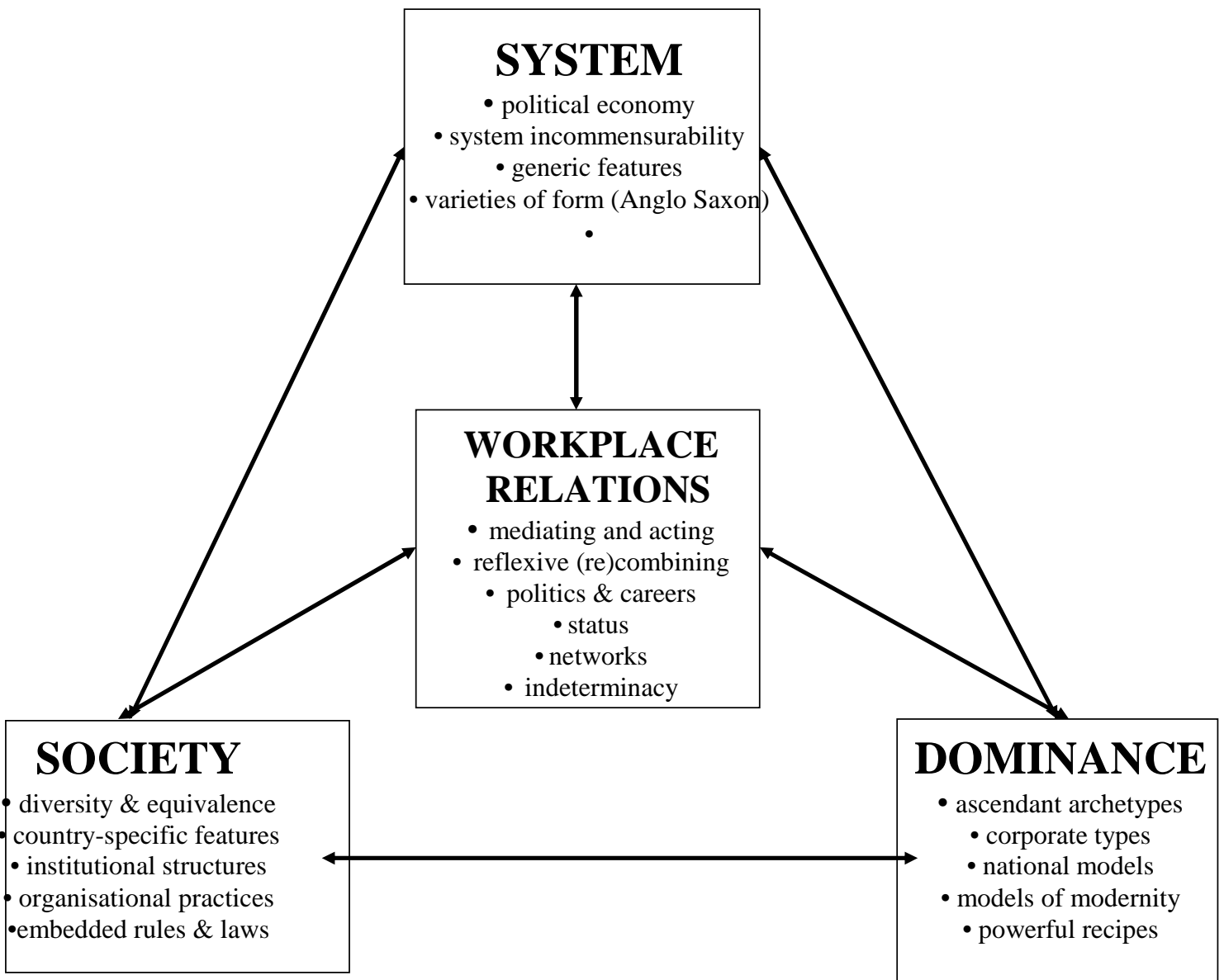
**TABLE 2 EXTENDED SUMMARY OF CASES  
[HERE]**

**Conclusion**

This necessarily compressed summary of our research has hopefully pointed to our concern with a detailed analysis of the experience, orientations and actions of managers, supervisors and employees in five varied Japanese manufacturing subsidiaries operating in the UK. Concentrating on the quartet of greenfield inward investors that operated in the same locality, we have documented important differences in their operations but in some key respects they were quite similar. They were all predominantly involved in routine assembly and materials processing operations, using a comparatively low-paid, semi-skilled workforce. Secondly, all of these firms were able to avoid union recognition, but alternative mechanisms of worker consultation and involvement were absent or rudimentary. Thus management-worker relations were primarily mediated through informal bargaining within firms and by workers' moves between firms. Thirdly, despite management efforts to co-ordinate their regulation of employment relations, all these firms found that the recruitment and retention of workers were more problematical than they had expected. Meanwhile workers remained critical of key features of management policies. Finally, while the rhetoric of management sometimes emphasised the active involvement of workers in problem-solving and continuous improvement, management's own commitment to such policies appeared patchy and inconsistent, and employees were usually sceptical about participation in such 'discretionary' activities.

In these terms, then, our Telford case-studies challenge accounts of the innovativeness of Japanese inward investors in terms of production regimes. They also question the extent to which managers have secured hegemony through distinctive employment practices. Managers in these firms have certainly gained more control over the organisation of the production process and the flexible deployment of labour than in British manufacturers of an earlier period, but this control should not be overstated. Furthermore, management control has been used in quite mundane and uneven ways to maintain quality and output levels, rather than to deliver anything like innovation-mediated production or high commitment, high performance workplaces. In the terms used by Kenney et al (1998) in their discussion of Japanese factories in Mexico, our greenfield subsidiaries look like 'reproduction' rather than 'learning' factories. We would also characterise the production operations and employment relations at the manufacturing facility of Computer-co in similar terms, though this was located in a different new town and was not a greenfield site.

At the same time we have registered important differences between our case-study firms in the evolution of management micro-politics and management-worker relations and the particular policy mixes and dilemmas that came to characterise each workplace. Thus we can compare them in terms of (i) their relationship to their parent firms and their wider commercial environment; (ii) the relationships between Japanese and British managers; (iii) their efforts to transfer Japanese production recipes; (iv) the stringency of the production regime; the precise contours of worker compliance and consent; and finally (v) the relative precariousness or viability of the enterprise [see Table 2 for an illustration of these features through the cases]. While our main fieldwork at each factory was concentrated in a period of a month, we also sought to develop an analysis of the evolution of management strategies and workplace relations over the period since its establishment. Thus we have been able to draw on comparisons of developments between firms and over time. On this basis we have sought to understand not only the pattern of current policies but also the social processes and social contexts informing their development, together with any continuing tensions and debates that have surrounded their implementation.



eudonym	Copy Co.	Car-part Co.	Computer Co.	Assembly Co.	PCB Co.	Machinery C
ownership	Japanese	Japanese/ European joint venture	Japanese take-over of UK firm	Japanese/US joint venture	Japanese	Japanese
product	Toner and copier manufacturer	Complex car components	Computers and servers	Plastic parts and assemblies	Printed circuit boards	Weighing ma and flow line
role of sites	Manufacturer supplying to marketing division	First tier supplier to range of final assemblers	Product division responsible for design, devlp. and manufacture	Supplier of parts to several final assemblers	Supplier of parts to several final assemblers	Design and st of capital equ
date of establishment	1985	1990	purchased 1990 closed 1999	1989	Estab. 1988 Closed 1999	1984
employees at time of origin fieldwork	550	720	475	180	92	50
sites	one	one	three	two	one	three
total interviewed	43	50	41	17	20	15
(as a percentage of employees)	8%	7%	9%	9%	22%	30%
Japanese expatriates interviewed	9	8	4	1	5	1
↳ Managers/ engineers/technicians	15	12	19	6	4	10
↳ Supervisors/TLs	4	8	5	2	-	1
↳ Maintenance/ production	15	22	13	8	11	3

**Figure 2 Contrasting perspectives on the operations of subsidiaries**

	<b>Transplant</b>	<b>Hybrid</b>	<b>Branch-plant</b>
Logic of management techniques	Universal best practice	Practices adapted to location	Practices adapted to role of plant
Character of class relations	Direct joint benefits	Negotiated accommodations	Subordination and conflicts
Development over time	Linear development to maturity	Blocked progression (or new model?)	Conditional development and decline
Model of globalisation	Hegemonic model moves from national to universal	Societal effects mediate and moderate hegemonic models	Persistently uneven and contested redevelopment, through interplay of system and societal effects
<b>Criticisms</b>	Reifies best practice and glosses over conflicts of interest	Ambiguity of claims: emergent models; functional equivalents; second best survivors?	How to theorise roles and trajectories of different subsidiaries?

**Table 2 Extended Summary of the Case Studies**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Car-part Co.</b>	<b>Copy Co.</b>	<b>PCB Co.</b>	<b>Assembly Co.</b>	<b>Co</b>
<b>Ownership</b>	Japanese (marginal involvement of European firm in initial joint venture)	Japanese	Japanese (but parent specialist in higher value production)	Japanese/US joint venture (trading co. and sleeping partner respectively)	Fair firm Jap
<b>Establishment and current status</b>	1990 and continuing to expand through period	1985 with model changes but fairly stable production	Opened 1988, closed 1999/2000	1989, fluctuating and shifting demand	Bo: 199
<b>Number of employees</b>	1996: 720 employees 2003: 1,400	1996: 550 employees 2003: 650	1996: 92 employees	1996: 180 employees 2003: 370	199: two
<b>Products</b>	Complex sub-assemblies for car industry	Toner and selected lines of copiers	Printed circuit boards	Plastic parts/ assemblies	De: anc cor anc Wc for pro par ear
<b>Role of site in commodity chains</b>	Major and powerful first tier supplier to range of car assembly plants across Europe, operating in increasingly competitive sector	Specialist producer that supplies products to marketing division for sale	Supplier to several final assemblers in competition with sister plants in East Asia, pushed towards smaller batch runs	Supplier of parts to shifting range of final assemblers, with initial advantage of patented mechanism	
<b>Major areas of task activity</b>	Moulding and machining of components, flow line assembly of complex components on lines dedicated to specific customers	Plastic moulding shop, process production & packing of toner, bench assembly of simple components, flow line assembly of complex machinery, manufacture of complex component, minor D&D role	Automated insertion, manual flow line insertion and rectification	Plastic moulding and routine assembly, with a little 'amateur' development effort	(i) : des of 1 ser (ii) ma PC flo: cor
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Car-part Co.</b>	<b>Copy Co.</b>	<b>PCB Co.</b>	<b>Assembly Co.</b>	<b>Co</b>
<b>Relations between Japanese and local management</b>	Japanese management cadre substantial and dominant, drawing lessons from US subsidiary. Personnel management local responsibility but with limited room for manoeuvre. Debate about breaking away from local pay norms.	Largely collaborative relationship between Japanese and local management with tensions about quality regime cross-cutting groups, main Japanese role in liaison with HQ and production management, local management responsibility for personnel	Suspicion and conflict between small Japanese management cadre and local managers, especially local personnel administration  Failure to become profitable in context of intra-management conflict and squeeze from competing Asian factories prompted closure	Japanese top manager liaises with parents and customers but management of site delegated to local management	UK dor sup cad ma pro dra pla loc  Str: inv by par pro
<b>Dominant features of work organisation</b>	Stringent implementation of	Team organisation in assembly means rotation	Routine, line-paced assembly, personalised	Extensive and intensive routine assembly	(i) : pro

<p>productivity and quality controls, highly routinised assembly work, training and job rotation limited by pressures for production and worker turnover, process engineers prime movers in work reorganisation with worker scepticism about spasmodic and ritualistic QC activities</p>	<p>between short cycles on bench assembly. Line assembly with longer cycles involves fool-proofed task routines but little rotation. Active quality control regime but spasmodic and superficial involvement in QC improvement activities</p>	<p>supervision, idiosyncratic selection from Japanese production repertoire, no time for quality circle activity, quality targets varied by customer, ageing equipment, crisis management</p>	<p>operations on benches and lines, some sub-assemblies at small branch factory, little evidence of Japanese production techniques of any sort, NVQ accreditation of basic skills</p>	<p>lim jug anc (ii) pai wit but off- pro pro che</p>
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<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Car-part Co.</b>	<b>Copy Co.</b>	<b>PCB Co.</b>	<b>Assembly Co.</b>	<b>Co</b>
<b>Personnel policies and strategies</b>	<p>Union avoidance, tightly regulated worker consultation process excluding most issues of concern to employees, payment of going rate for the locality but more stringent demands in terms of work pace and compulsory overtime, diluted selection process and reluctant use of agency labour influenced by recruitment and retention problems</p>	<p>Active union avoidance, no formal consultation arrangements, pays modest going rate, move from youth recruitment to older workers, cultivation of loyalty through internal promotion (but compromised by external recruitment of new team leaders) and 'caring' attitude, commitment to employment security coupled with use of temporary agency workers.</p>	<p>Non union, low wages, personalised relations, dramatisation of competitive pressures from Chinese factories, use of agency temps to cover fluctuations and facilitate recruitment</p>	<p>Non-union, modest wages involving PbR system and attendance bonus, face-to-face efforts to cool out problems, use of National Vocational Qualifications to document and reinforce training, branch factory as escape from constraints of local labour market</p>	<p>Nc coi he; go: ser cul tra bu bel sec of thr rec usc fro zer</p>
<b>Dominant features of employment relations and foci of tension</b>	<p>Widespread shopfloor criticism of unfavourable effort bargain, cynical instrumentalism, informal operator efforts to moderate the impact of management control systems, team leaders under pressure, substantial turnover</p>	<p>Management saw labour turnover as problem, process workers often critical of management's erosion of their relative indulgency pattern, elsewhere tensions around quality and productivity; criticisms of team-leaders by operators &amp; managers</p>	<p>Tensions over work pressure, informal resistances, significant turnover of established as well as new workers</p>	<p>Informal fiddles around PbR, significant labour turnover</p>	<p>(i) gai ten exj cri ma inc an</p>

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