China Perspectives

2019-4 | 2019

(Re)imagining Chinese Spaces in Urban Africa.

LEE, Ching Kwan. 2018. *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/9738>

DOI: 10.4000/chinaperspectives.9738

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2019

Number of pages: 53-54

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Katy L. Lam, "LEE, Ching Kwan. 2018. *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.", *China Perspectives* [Online], 2019-4 | 2019, Online since 01 December 2019, connection on 29 March 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/9738> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.9738>

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- 1 “Is China the new colonial power in Africa?” is an often-asked question and attention-catching headline. Nonetheless, Professor Ching Kwan Lee tells us at the beginning of her new book, *The Specter of Global China*, that no answer can be given, because colonialism and neo-colonialism are fundamentally inappropriate analytical frameworks. Colonialism relates to a particular historical and geopolitical context, and colonisers often enjoy exclusive or monopolistic commercial rights in colonised territories. However, China is a latecomer in Africa and does not enjoy the same privileges, and Africa is fundamentally different now from the colonial era of previous centuries.
- 2 Readers should not be disappointed by this missing answer, because Lee asks and answers a more pertinent question in her book: “Is Chinese state capital a different kind of capital?” Chinese investment overseas is often tagged with “Chinese state” and thus inspires “fear.” The fear is associated with questions of hidden political agendas, poor labour rights, and undermining the host country’s development. In sum, there is often concern that Chinese overseas investment is a win-lose deal in which the Chinese side wins and the host country loses. Are these concerns empirically grounded?
- 3 With decades of research on Chinese capitalism in South China and on Global China, Lee has conducted six years of ethnographic research in

Zambia on this question. She answers it by comparing Chinese state capital with global private capital in the copper mining and construction sectors in Zambia. Suggesting that there are multiple forms of capital (or, as she writes in Chapter One, “varieties of capital”), she advances an analytical framework by considering capital as processes and relations of power that are embedded in the society where capital activities take place. Lee observes the processes and power relations of different capitals in “three moments of capital” (pp. 10-3), namely: 1) wealth accumulation, 2) production, and 3) managerial ethos. All of these moments of capital are subject to local resistance (pp. 13-21) from above (as in politician bargaining, state regulations) and from below (as in strikes, riot, rumours).

- 4 Lee answers “yes” to her research question. She argues that Chinese state capital is indeed different from global private capital under certain circumstances. The fundamental difference lies on the capital objective. For global private capital, “profit-maximisation” (to make as much profit as possible) is the key single objective. For Chinese state capital, it is a “profit-optimisation,” which means the capital has to satisfy multiple arrays of interests at the same time, including China’s natural resource security and expanding political influence in Africa, as well as profit-making and market expansion. This profit-optimisation objective in fact does not make Chinese capital more evil but on the contrary makes it more vulnerable to local political and labour agency. In contrast to global private capital, Chinese state investment is found to be more willing to negotiate with Zambian politicians and labour, thus leaving the latter potential room for bargaining and advancing their own interests.
- 5 In Chapter One, Lee provides a brief literature review on capitalism in China and institutional features of the Chinese enterprise system to inform readers of the background to Chinese state companies going overseas. Then, Lee lays out her conceptual framework on varieties of capital to analyse Chinese state capital at the global level. As local embeddedness is considered a key factor in shaping global economic activities, Lee highlights the characteristics of the Zambian patrimonial state and populist politics, as well as its development struggle in the post-colonial era.
- 6 The second chapter focuses on the first moment of capital, which is its accumulation logic. Lee examines how Chinese state capital and global private capital reacted differently to the global financial crisis in 2008, and to Zambia’s new economic measures and development strategy in the same year. Lee finds that the key difference is the concept of profit. Unlike global private capital, where profit is mainly about money, local political patronage and access to commodities/resources (such as copper) are other important forms of profit for Chinese capital. Consequently, both Beijing and Zambian political and economic actors simultaneously shape the logic of wealth accumulation of Chinese capital.

- 7 The third chapter examines the labour dimension of capital. It looks into how the two types of capital manage their labour production. In a highly neoliberal global economy, labour in both cases is found to suffer from casualisation. Nonetheless, labour conditions in global private capital are mainly linked to market price fluctuations, as the major concern of global firms is the sale of commodities, copper in particular. In contrast, Chinese capital is both price and production sensitive. Stable production for export back to China is also of paramount importance. As a result, Chinese state companies are more vulnerable to labour strike, which make them more inclined to compromise with labour demands. In other words, Chinese companies are not only market-price sensitive but also politically sensitive in managing their workforce, especially when politicians work with labour to negotiate with Chinese firms.
- 8 The fourth chapter is about managerial ethos. Lee identifies two distinct work attitudes – the “individual careerism” (p. 102-4) of expatriates in global private firms, and the “eating bitterness” (p. 95-101) of Chinese state managers. The work culture of Chinese state firms is more collectively committed and controlled than global ones. Whereas some continue to suspect that Chinese staff are convicted labour, other Zambians show respect for the hard effort and discipline of Chinese managers working side by side with local workers.
- 9 After comparing the three moments of the two types of capital, Lee discusses the counter-movement of the Zambian state and labour’s resistance to foreign capital in Chapter Five. Even though many actions have been taken, internal divisions and divergence of interests among Zambians, especially workers, have deeply undermined the collective bargaining effort. In her last chapter, Lee concludes by expanding the horizon to case studies in other African and Latin American countries, justifying the intellectual value of the notion of “varieties of capital.”
- 10 One key message that Lee tries to convey is that Chinese overseas capital is less powerful than in public imagination, and is sometimes more willing to compromise with local demands than other global capital. She suggests that developing countries should coordinate better internally to manage incoming Chinese investments to better serve their development interests.
- 11 Lee has made a major contribution in the fields of China in Africa and of Chinese overseas investment, in which theoretical frameworks and comparative studies are still insufficient. However, as she also highlights, Chinese state capital varies according to circumstances and thus may differ elsewhere from that in the Zambian copper mining sector. More research must be done on other varieties of capital, such as Chinese private capital, Western state capital, and emerging economies in strategic and non-strategic sectors in Africa and other continents.

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