Encouraged by the CCP’s “going out” policy, China has, since the early 2000s, become a major investor in global capital markets, now rivaling the stature of many western nation-states. However, the scope and visibility of Chinese-led investments, especially in regions neglected by Western capital since the 1980s, has prompted journalistic hype and, perhaps, over-exaggerated claims on Chinese capital. A “global rhetorical battle has emerged between a largely Western discourse of Chinese neocolonial plundering and blatant disregard for human rights”, writes Ching Kwan Lee, while Beijing presents itself as “free of hegemonic aspirations or World Bank-style conditionality” (p.2). Economic geography is not immune to this debate, with observers pondering whether Chinese internationalization constitutes a novel process of inclusive globalization (Liu and Dunford 2016) or a spatial fix with Chinese characteristics (Harvey 2016).

Taking these antagonistic, if overwrought, discourses as her provocation, C.K. Lee turns to the Zambian copper belt to find what makes internationalized Chinese capital different from other forms of capital, through an investigation of the mining and construction industries. Lee’s theoretical framework, which she entitles “varieties of capital”, is a conjunctural analysis of Chinese investment in Africa structured around two ideal-types: global private capital, which is deployed with the short-term intention of maximizing shareholder value; and Chinese state capital, which is structured toward the long-term interest of the Chinese state. These ideal-types share the basic structure of exploiting labor for the procurement of profit, but their different driving interests compel each form of capital to respond to its local context in divergent ways, altering the accumulation dynamics, production process, and ethos of each variety.

The strongest aspect of Lee’s book is its masterful deployment of the global ethnographic method, pioneered by Michael Burawoy, as a tool for rigorous conjunctural analysis. Indeed, the
book reads, at points, like an homage to Burawoy’s (1972) *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines*, notwithstanding their common setting. But the Copper Belt that Lee finds in the late 2000s is all but completely rusted. In the appendix, Lee recounts how years of structural adjustment, austerity, and under-development led to the dilapidation and neglect of Zambia’s institutional infrastructure; namely, the University of Zambia archives, where Burawoy was able to scour a massive compilation of national economic statistics, doctoral dissertations, and research monographs. In post-colonial Africa, these institutions often survive, if at all, with only one staff-member, old or broken computers, and no apparent method of organization. Finding archival resources rather unfruitful, Lee instead devotes most of her time towards crafting a humanized but structurally-sensitive narrative of Zambia’s internationalized present. Here, the capitalist power of China and the impending possibility of development feature prominently in both national politics and the imaginaries of Zambian workers.

The material condition of peripheralization, vivid in her recollection of the research process, is echoed in Lee’s ethnographic vignettes of mines, construction sites, worker housing complexes, administrative offices, and slums. The memory of brighter, more stable days of British colonial mining practices, the local awareness of underdevelopment and plunder by successive neo-colonial firms and neoliberal governmental regimes, and the politics of precarity are all subjects broached in *The Specter of Global China*, validated by interviews and conversations with both young Zambian mine workers and retired veterans of the Copper Belt, as well as through supplemental evidence from the Zambian press, union documents, and legal histories of mining regulation. Her multi-sited ethnography eschews interpretations of China as simply a new imperialist power, and instead offers a conjunctural analysis, or as Lee puts it, an “evental” approach to the rhythms of capital, charting a middle ground between Weberian and Marxian theories of state-capital relations. Lee’s consideration of the particular intersection between outward Chinese investment, itself informed by China’s own internal contradictions (cf. Hung 2015), with the layered histories of foreign investment in Zambia, provides an instructive
methodological example for scholars interested in the articulation between local social landscapes and internationalized state-capital configurations.

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The main chapters of the book analyze the behavior of “Chinese state capital” and “global private capital” through what Lee terms as “three moments” of capital: accumulation, production, and ethos. Unifying these three moments is Lee’s contention that Chinese mining investment in Zambia, because it is controlled by a centralized state through state-owned enterprises, must concede and adapt its more capitalistic tendencies to political and social compromises, or what Polanyi (2001) might call a condition of “embeddedness”. While China’s market demands high-quality copper, unmitigated extractivism is limited by the “profit-plus” interests of the Chinese foreign policy apparatus. The “plus” qualifier includes the long-term security of copper deposits, which requires some elements of international diplomacy and cooperation with Zambian politicians (and thereby their electorate) in terms of labor agreements, land acquisition practices, and cyclical production adjustments. Chinese state capital in mining does not seek maximum profitability so much as long-term stability and a reasonable rate of return.

The second chapter, on accumulation, offers a particularly illustrative, if serendipitous, account of this difference by detailing how Chinese state-owned mines and private mines responded to the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. As copper prices plummeted by two-thirds in 2008, private firms haphazardly “had to reduce labor, development, and contractors, scaling down CSR [corporate social responsibility] like the malaria program” while NFCA, a Chinese state-ran mining company, announced the “three ‘no’s’ policy: no retrenchment, no production reduction, and no salary cuts” (p.40, 41). Around the same time, CNMC, a state-owned mining company, opened a value-added manufacturing zone that had been planned by the
Zambian government for years, despite “global private capital” finding the venture unprofitable. In the words of a senior executive of CNMC:

In the eyes of the state, our meager corporate profit does not count as much as its interest in diplomacy and foreign relations. It cares more about whether we invest locally to facilitate China-Zambia relations. (p.44)

The imperative to secure amiable local partnerships collides with the slash-and-burn tactics typical of accounts of American corporate investment sites (Klein 2007). In fact, Zambian officials were able to capitalize on Chinese interest in Zambia to entice the Chinese state to construct schools, provide interest-free loans, and construct physical infrastructures that had been backlogged since the 1970s.

The third chapter examines the real practices of resource extraction; Lee recounts her engulfment in the production site, entering the mines and even putting herself in physical danger:

…after more than an hour at a particularly suffocating corner at the 826-meter level, I felt my lungs collapse and stick together, with no air going in no matter how hard I breathed. (p.57)

Auto-ethnographic moments such as these create a productive tension between the lived Victorian, debilitating conditions of production and the abstract logics of accumulation. Indeed, Lee provides an instructive methodological example for geographers wishing to conceptualize the mechanisms that mediate between the two (cf. Peck 2015). But even under these debilitating conditions, Lee locates divergent logics at play. Managers of global-private firms, in a rebuke of the neoliberal myth that private ownership maximizes efficiency, exuded a “trader mentality” – recklessly halting mining development, firing workers, and initiating countless tiers of
subcontract agreements—while Chinese-ran mines continuously pressed for expanded production, mine development, and the fulfillment of production targets. This “producer mentality”, perhaps indicative of the remnants of state socialism, adds an insightful case to the literature on plan-rational state-capital configurations (cf. Johnson 1982). Left to the short-sighted logics of financialized capital, Lee reveals how accumulation creates its own limits through exhausting the material base for profitable extraction; one of her interviewees, a private mine manager, candidly, if unknowingly, endorses state planning: “The fundamental mistake was where investment went … When you are not rushing, you can plan properly” (p. 68, 69). Nonetheless, Chinese state capital and global private capital bear a strong resemblance in their relationship with Zambian labor. The workers Lee encounters generally have two choices: with global private capital, they might receive higher wages, but are threatened by the looming possibility of retrenchment at any moment; with Chinese state capital, they receive about 30 percent less in wages despite having a more stable employment outlook. Like all forms of capital, labor’s choices are structurally circumscribed.

The fourth and fifth chapters analyze managerial ethos and contestation, respectively, and I will argue here that they provide an instructive example of how a conjunctural analysis, attuned to the rhythms of uneven capitalist development, might be performed using global ethnographic methods. Lee’s analysis of the ascetic ethos of Chinese managers and the parallel frustration of African workers with their political economy illustrate the extent to which uneven development is embodied in everyday practices, ideas, and discourses. Chapter 5, for example, draws on conversations with retired Zambian mine workers who recall British colonial-era mining firms with a wistful nostalgia. Because they were threatened with de-colonial movements, these firms provided a well-funded infrastructure for social reproduction, including pensions, schools, hospitals, housing, sports clubs, and utilities. In contrast, contemporary firms “had all to various degrees come up short in terms of employment conditions, community and social infrastructure building, skill training, and technical standards of production” (p. 150). These “imperial ruins”
(Stoler 2008), combined with the perception of government complicity, prompt a generalized
distrust among Zambian workers of both forms of capital.

Another relationship, examined in Chapter 4, is that of Chinese managers, Chinese,
expatriated labor, and Zambian workers. A tension between normative outlooks on life and labor
reflect Zambia’s colonial present encountering a markedly bourgeois ideology espoused by
Chinese interviewees. A “collective asceticism” that recalls Weber’s Calvinist work ethic and
Marx’s rational miser is unearthed through Lee’s accounts of Chinese salaried workers; as one
HR manager lectured: “If you work hard, you will get what you want. That is what we Chinese
believe in” (p.96). Indeed, “eating bitterness”, the term for anticipatory frugality, is invoked as
the reason for the class position of Chinese managers and Chinese development writ large. Under
state socialism as well as their contemporary condition of expatriated labor, Chinese managers
and workers see “eating bitterness” as a virtue, a part of nationalist teleology. Zambian workers,
on the other hand, understood this work ethic as pathological, even prompting rumors that
Chinese overseas workers were actually enslaved convicts exiled from the mainland. After
Western media picked up these allegations, Chinese officials saw this “as confirmation of
China’s victimization by the West” (p.105). These two examples provide an ideal illustration of
how “global China” constitutes a combination of historical trajectories. “Global China” is
imprinted with the consciousness of imperial intrusion into China itself, as well as the memory of
colonial occupation on the part of Zambian workers and government. As Lee puts it: “Zambian
workers’ and communities’ varied experiences with different mine ownership regimes and
foreign capital of different national origins forged a set of layered historical references and
standards” (p.132). This is a sociology of uneven development that recognizes the dialectical
mixture of novelty and history, power and subjection, and, perhaps, an embryonic Chinese
hegemony that appears possible, but still distant.

* * *
Before concluding, allow me to offer a cautionary note on Lee’s “varieties of capital” framework. At first sight, her differentiation between the rationalized pursuits of Chinese state-owned enterprises and the marketized strategies of privately-owned firms provides an insightful heuristic on which to examine the practices of extractive capital in Zambia. However, the structure of her conceptual distinction runs the risk of ossifying an intersection of relations that are specific to a concrete moment. Let me be more specific. The use of ideal-types “construed from the pool of existing investors in Zambia’s copper and construction sectors” (p.5) entails a generalization that potentially elides historical-geographical specificity, and threatens to collapse the contingent and necessary structural forces that delimit the behavior of these state-capital configurations. For her part, Lee avoids the worst pitfalls of ideal-type epistemologies, which can rapidly fall into limitless categorization (Peck and Theodore 2007). Conceptualizing capital as a relational process, she implicitly recognizes the capacity for change. But because her ideal typology is constructed on separate, abstract “interests” – state capital as predicated on “interests defined by a sovereign state” versus private capital based on “those of shareholders” (p.4) – Lee elides how these “interests” themselves are shaped by relational processes. In other words, while capital is conceived relationally and processually, the state is not.

As neo-Gramscian scholars have long pointed out, the state is part of, not separate from, the social division of labor, and as such is constitutive of and interpenetrated with a multitude of class-relevant processes that can transgress national borders (Poulantzas 1978). The particular strategies states undertake to aide in capital accumulation are, then, overdetermined, and not a timeless characteristic of an ideal “state” or “private” capital. Rectifying this may entail a deeper engagement with the national and global regulatory frameworks under which her foil of global private capital – which were actually Swiss- and Indian-sourced mining firms – operates, and dispensing the idea that the state is a quantitative object (whether “the state” is more present in one form of capital than another), instead interrogating why state actors undertake particular
accumulation strategies in order to reproduce their own power and legitimacy (a qualitative, relational question).

C.K. Lee’s monograph, overall, masterfully reveals how Chinese state-owned mining enterprises interact with a local context. I emphasize mining here, because Lee’s analysis of the construction industry is somewhat muted in comparison to the mining industry. When it is mentioned, it appears to be just as predatory as comparable firms from South Africa and elsewhere, with the Chinese government granting deceptively-priced concessional loans for infrastructure-building, suggesting a looming threat of long-term indebtedness. This begs the question of whether this is indeed a characteristic of Chinese state capital, or the articulation between Zambia’s “resource nationalism” (p.154) and state-owned enterprises in the somewhat exceptional industry of mineral extraction. But this criticism should be read as more of a provocation for spatially-sensitive scholars to investigate the articulation of “global China” with different industrial sectors, nation-states, and local contexts. It provides an exemplary methodological display of how extended cases and conjunctural analyses might be gainfully utilized to study the interrelations between local practices and global outcomes; as such, *The Specter of Global China* will undoubtedly appeal to geographical political economists, critical resource geographers, Asia and Africa scholars, and economic sociologists who wish to understand the contemporary moment of economic restructuring, particularly as it unfolds in a non-North Atlantic setting.

References


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