

## Book Review

Work, Employment and Society

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Ching Kwan Lee

**The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa**

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018, \$30 pbk, (ISBN: 9780226340838), 256 pp.

**Reviewed by Chris Smith, Royal Holloway University of London, UK**

Globalisation increasingly means interest in work and employment inside China is giving way to how Chinese enterprises operate outside the country. Most research attention has focused on developing countries, where Chinese firms have been more ascendant. Africa has figured significantly in this story, as the continent has received major amounts of Chinese investment, especially in infrastructure and mining. Relatedly a narrative has developed pitching China as the new imperialist power in Africa (Ampiah and Naidu, 2008; Carmody, 2011). Research countering this line has been produced (Brautigam, 2009) but limited attention has been given to the narratives of actors in workplaces on the ground. Lee's book smashes this complacency, producing extensive interview evidence from managers, trade unionists, workers and politicians conducted during fieldwork undertaken across a lengthy eight-year period in two sectors: mining and construction. There is no other book like this currently, and, as such, *The Specter of Global China* is compulsory reading for anyone interested in comparative development, work and employment in Chinese companies today.

The book is structured into six chapters: a contextual introduction, theory chapter, and chapters on contrasting regimes of production, management regimes and workers' challenges to capital – chapter 5, which highlights strikes, widespread informality of theft, alongside a critical assessment of the work of NGOs. A concluding chapter reappraises the importance of Lee's theoretical approach and speculates on China's global expansion as 'an event'. There is also an excellent Appendix ('An Ethnographer's Odyssey: The Mundane and the Sublime of Researching China in Zambia'), where Lee recounts struggles over access, and her journey to uncover characteristics of work and employment in multinational corporations (MNCs) in Zambia. This can be read as a standalone parable on ethnography.

Theoretically, Lee emphasises varieties of capital, not capitalism, dismissing the idea of integrated national narratives. As such she stresses the importance of empirical context where work and workers' struggles are embedded in what she sees as 'three moments of capital': accumulation, production and ethos (echoing Weber's cultural 'spirit of capitalism'). Through the empirical chapters, contrasts are made between MNC investments from different nations, and private and state capital, and the different pressures they

bring into the workplace. Investment, for example, is compared between long-term (slow profits and technical development) versus short-term (finance and profit taking). Labour is divided between casual employment contracts and regular ones, and labour organisation in Zambia is analysed in the past and today – as recalled by older and younger workers. Further, Lee contrasts Chinese capital in the two sectors: in construction, where it fits within the casualised labour model dominant in the sector; and in mining, where Chinese managers behave differently from counterparts in other mining MNCs – working longer hours, living in more basic dormitory accommodation, having deferred methods of payment, and interacting more informally with employees. This makes Chinese managers altogether different from expatriate managers from US, UK and South African MNCs. The ‘spirit’ of Chinese capital in mining is heavily conditioned by privatisation reforms in China, with its intense competition for work and what is referred to as the sacrifice managers make by hard work and private deprivations (‘eating bitterness’) – considered a normal part of being a manager.

The strength of the book is its sweep – moving backwards and forwards through the working lives of old and young Zambian mining and construction workers who talk in articulate ways about the position of labour in the economy, the high tax on income and low tax on companies, short-sighted investment in poor quality work clothes and equipment, and low levels of skill and human resource training compared with the mines under nationalisation (and Anglo-American ownership). While critical of Chinese investment for low pay, Lee reports praise for firms (particularly in mining) for long-term investment, wider community engagement, and commitment to the country and hostility to the finance capital model dominant in mines owned by other nationalities. The educational pressures in Chinese society keep wives and children at home. While for purposes of control and economic efficiency, Chinese expats are typically male and live away from families – adding to a sense of sacrifice and work ethic that is often contrasted negatively with what are considered the poor work attitudes and commitment of local Zambian workers.

It is difficult to find fault with the book, so rich and wide-ranging is the quality of the ethnographic data. Critics might notice the less developed nature of the research on the construction sector, the too neat or bi-polar quality of comparisons in places (which is always a danger of rigid comparative case methodology) and the lack of engagement with other researchers on working life in mining and construction more generally, and not only within the Zambian political economy. The actual labour processes are less described, apart from direct reporting of a very scary trip into a copper mine, and the effect this has on the researcher. Rather, discussion of employment relations and labour contracts and conditions figure more than work processes. However, these are minor issues and I would encourage anyone interested in China and the overseas Chinese firms to rush out and buy this excellent book.

## References

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