

Lisa Rofel SSFS5 Conference Abstract

We are living through a massively unstable re-structuring of the post-Cold War world. Despite the early pronouncements in the West that the Cold War is over, much of the world is still living through the after-effects of its supposed end, and will do so for some time to come. The tearing apart of Syria, the re-arrangement of alliances in relation to the Israeli occupation of Palestine and indeed a wide range of unstable movements to re-arrange the entire Middle East and West Asia, in both more democratic and more authoritarian directions, from Morocco to Turkey to Iraq and Afghanistan, are precisely the manifestation of these after-effects. These after-effects manifest in different ways in various regions in addition to the Middle East, such as Latin America, Asia and southern Africa. The “post-socialist” countries are thus not “post” in the sense of having buried socialism deep in the past; rather they are “post” in the sense that post-colonial theory has argued: a moment of grappling with the interstices of creating an Other world, and, in the current era, negotiating the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism that keeps producing as a counter-effect various revisionist histories of the socialist past. (Atanasoski and Vora 2017, Dai forthcoming).

This is a struggle to make governments around the world more accountable to its citizens – or maybe we should say not to forego its former accountability in the wake of worldwide transformations through neoliberal capitalism. This struggle is what makes these movements so heightened, violent and ongoing. We also see the popular attempts to rupture ideologies of development, as concern for the environmental capacities of the earth to harbor life have increased at the popular level. These emerging worlds involve trans-regional movements, such as global Islam, global environmental movements, global China.

My paper first addresses one piece of these earth shattering (literally) post-Cold War changes and instabilities: the so-called rise of China. Then I address various movements and incipient potentialities to create a commons based on social justice. For the first part of the paper, I take inspiration from Laura Doyle’s work on inter-imperiality. We must examine both elite and non-elite actors in what Doyle calls their “inter-imperial positionality” to examine how they shape economic, material and cultural practices in this new post-post-Cold War (to use Dai Jinhua’s phrase). In the case of the so-called rise of China, we might hesitate, however, before invoking the term “imperial.” It is perhaps too soon to make that pronouncement.

In this paper, I raise more questions than I can answer at this point. In the U.S., we hear anxious talk about the so-called rise of China. Indeed, China has changed dramatically in the last thirty years, as it has embraced in an experimental fashion the global capitalist economy and fiercely promoted a culture of consumption within China, even as its pursuit of wealth has created ever greater inequality within China. This pursuit of wealth is motivated through the long *durée* history of colonialism in China since the mid-19th century. Up and through the present, Chinese public discourse and history textbooks include continuous discussions of that history, in part because that history motivated the socialist revolution and the rise of the Communist Party to power. In addition, in the face of the bankruptcy of any ideology or normative values in contemporary China, the encouragement to embrace a fantasy of wealth – along with a strong nationalism -- has been the main means by which the Chinese state tries to bind its citizens to itself. Yeh and Wharton have argued that internal exploitation within China is directly connected to what the Chinese state is doing outside of China. Yeh and Wharton make

this point by demonstrating that in Chinese policy initiatives “the West” in China is defined less as a geographical space and more as a frontier region of poverty.

One thing we can discern is how much the Chinese state, along with state-owned companies, both mimic and try to distance themselves from the way in which the U.S. has established and continues to establish its imperial pursuits. Thus, perhaps we should in this moment talk about “inter-hegemonies.”

That China’s pursuit of wealth has led to its increased presence in various regions of the Global South is clear. The Chinese state is mainly interested in gaining access to greater energy resources in order to develop its own domestic economy. In so doing, it has mimicked some of the U.S. practices of development, including intensive consumption of energy resources. Yet, we must caution against overly hegemonic interpretations of our own. In this pursuit, the Chinese state has called upon a variety of different approaches for different regions. Thus, it has not tried to impose one homogeneous means for interacting with quite distinct governments and peoples. And again, it has been experimental and supple in its various strategies. Indeed, one characteristic of the Chinese state throughout the socialist era and after has been its experimental nature.

For example, with many African nations, China has invoked their mutual socialist past of shared politics and China’s ongoing support. During that socialist past, China was intimately tied to various socialist countries and movements in Eastern Europe, Africa and southeast Asia. China had offered financial and food aid as it tried to fashion a third world alternative to both the Soviet Union and the United States. China pulls on this past history to describe its current activities. What do we make of this current narrative of south-south cooperation? (See the debate between Yan Hairong and C.K. Lee.) China offers a great deal of infrastructure building in various regions. They describe this as support for other nations’ ability to pursue their own development. They also point out how much this differs from the interventions of the U.S., which, they assert, never offered concrete aid. The types of infrastructure being built – roads, dams, ports – also support China’s extraction needs. But the Chinese state is also willing to build that which a particular government requests, with no direct relation to China’s extraction needs. The Chinese state also takes a strong public stance of non-interference in the governance of other states. This is partly due to its opposition to criticisms of human rights violations within China, and partly due to its interest in investing in countries no matter the form of their governments. But again, it poses itself in direct opposition to the U.S. model of imperial interference.

Doyle’s work and that of others working in world history and international relations rightly emphasize the interactions between the imperial powers and their representatives, on the one side, and local populations, on the other. In the case of China, focusing on ordinary Chinese migrants is essential. Indeed, Chinese immigrants to various African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian countries have lived in those regions for several centuries, long pre-dating this recent so-called rise. Thus, it is important to focus not simply on the Chinese state, or to homogenize all Chinese actors. Derek Sheridan (2017), for example, has examined the fraught relationship between Chinese state actors and ordinary Chinese migrants in Tanzania or, as he puts it, the differentiation between actions taken in the name of the state – and not just the Chinese state -- and actions by those who feel more vulnerable. Sheridan, in the spirit of Doyle, gets us past binaries of homogeneous groups: *the* Tanzanians versus *the* Chinese. In examining the complex dialectics and multiple differentiations among Tanzanian state officials, Tanzanian street bureaucrats, Chinese state company employees and Chinese migrant small shop owners, Sheridan addresses the central question of “contested vernacular theories about the relationship

between imperialism, power, and status; and in turn, contested expectations regarding the Chinese state in the world.” (2017) How, he asks, “does one determine privilege or vulnerability when one party has the economic capacity to pay while the other has the sovereign capacity to detain?” Moreover, there is an ongoing set of disagreements among various Chinese in Tanzania about the following question: are the vulnerabilities of global Chinese citizenship caused by an unwilling state [a state unwilling to back them up] or are they the result of the insufficient ethics of private Chinese citizens?” This question in turn raises the large issue of the relationship between privilege and power, on the one hand, and risks and vulnerabilities on the other. How are these distributed and how do the relations among them operate?

Mingwei Huang’s work (2017) examines cross-ethnic, cross racial relations and the matter of racism. Huang emphasizes the various racialized intimacies that shape the racial hierarchies between Chinese traders and African workers in Johannesburg, South Africa, the racializing practices that are central to capital accumulation by Chinese entrepreneurs in Johannesburg, South Africa. As she argues, “the ever-expanding frontiers of global capital forces movement and transgression, and in the process unmoors norms of race, gender, class, and sexuality.” Huang creatively tracks the broader arenas of intimacy, such as hands changing money, sharing toilets and rubbing up against one another in narrow aisles. In other words, intimacy in the realms of public life. This is terrifically insightful, because these kinds of intimacies are not so easy to police, and defy easy categorization but at the same time are absolutely central to the feelings of anxiety that Chinese traders feel that keeping racial hierarchies intact are never secured. Ironically, it is the very idea of pollution that draws some Chinese migrant traders to South Africa. They think South Africa’s air is clean. Are we witnessing disruption here or rather a more ambiguous set of practices that both re-enforce and transgress all at once? The use of different terms like overseas, migration, diaspora point to different relationships to China and to the country of residence.

Of course, other people important in this process are the non-elite ordinary citizens of the countries in which China’s presence is becoming increasingly evident. In Latin America, for example, what has struck me most about China’s interventions there is that, unlike in Africa, the Chinese state-owned companies do not bring the majority of employees from China but rather hire local labor. Perhaps they have learned from some of the intensive labor conflicts in places like Zambia (CK Lee).

This has affected the interactions between local people and those Chinese working for state-owned companies. At least that is the case in Argentina. In my own work on China in Latin America, which I am just beginning, I have found, in Argentina at least, a wide range of views on China’s presence. Again, most Argentinians do not have any contact either with Chinese companies or Chinese people. Chinese migrants are now the majority of small grocery store owners; if an Argentinian has an opinion about Chinese, they will most often point to the grocery stores. Among scholars and journalists, one finds more detailed attention paid to China’s presence. Among this latter group, I have found a very self-conscious inter-imperial positioning, not to mention in some cases anti-imperial positioning. But also important to note is the wide range of views about China’s presence in Argentina. Some, like Luciano Bolinaga (), talk of a “Beijing Consensus” having replaced the Washington Consensus. They believe China is building an economic hegemony in Latin America that is “re-primitivizing” the Latin American economy. That is, China is forcing Latin America into a position of under-development, as a source of natural resources for which in return China presses its own manufactured products. Moreover, China fails to pass along the manufacturing technologies, knowledge and resources to

take the next step in turning raw natural resources into products, such as soybean products. Ninety-five percent of Argentina's soy is sold to China. Indeed, the rise in soy production in Argentina is in direct response to Chinese demand (Rachel Cypher).

Others do not cast blame on China but instead blame their own government for its never-ending corruption, failure to initiate any development projects on its own, crushing debt burdens, and therefore failure to care for its people. These latter welcome Chinese investments. What would one call this position? There are still others who welcome Chinese presence in order to counter the U.S. This would be the case in Venezuela. Others feel it is vital for Argentinians to educate themselves about China and Chinese culture in anticipation of a future, more personally felt relationship with China. Two Argentine journalists have dedicated themselves to starting a new journal, whose title is the Chinese name *Dangdai* (当代)(meaning: the Contemporary Era): *Primera Revista de Intercambio Cultural entre Argentina y China*.

In returning to the "inside" of China, it is worth noting the ideological work Chinese state-owned film companies are performing to support China's increased presence in the global south. The *Wolf Warrior* set of films is a case in point. They are the highest grossing films in recent years. In a cultural commentary series on *Wolf Warrior II*, a group of international scholars analyze the film's representations of China's presence in Africa (in Chinese at : <http://routerjcs.nctu.edu.tw/router>; coming soon in English at u.osu.edu/mclc/). The Chinese hero saves the "good" Africans from African terrorists who are backed by an American mercenary. This film is for a domestic Chinese audience. Its complex mix of goodwill and nationalism lays the groundwork for broad support of the Chinese state's ventures abroad. But its inevitable contradictions have also lent themselves to broad criticism.

What we make of China's so-called rise is an urgent question. Can we make international alliances to address this phenomenon in ways that will promote social justice?

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The China Quarterly 209