

**Mikkel Bunkenborg, Morten Nielsen and Morten Axel Pedersen,** *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalisation.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022. 277 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-5983-3

This fascinating and thought-provoking book exists as a palimpsest of different themes and 'levels' of analysis. Probably of widest interest is the topic of 'globalising China' and the question of whether it is possible to draw any general conclusions about the ways in which Chinese interests are attempting to root themselves in Eurasia and Africa and form win-win interactions with local populations. An equally important subject for the authors is anthropological methodology. How can such a geographically disparate and still shape-shifting process as globalising China be studied? Comparison of different cases of China in the world is seemingly the obvious method. But the authors of this book systematically undermine the idea that a collaborative research project in which anthropologists specialised in diverse sites of Chinese expansion compare and pool their results is adequate for the task. The third theme to run through the book is the most original and interesting. It focuses analytically on the 'failed collaboration' between the authors, positing it as a mirror of the failed collaboration and endemic misunderstandings between the Chinese and their interlocutors in the two sites studied, Mongolia and Mozambique. The misunderstandings observed in the field are shown to reappear in the discordances among the anthropologists about how to interpret their materials, even about what a visible event or thing means. Thus, it is argued, the real-life confusion of globalising China can be understood *from within*, from the several years of witnessing, documenting and debating its effects among the anthropologists. In theoretical terms, this poses a challenge to straightforward positivist-type analysis, since it disallows – or seems to disallow, a point to which this review will return – any observation from the field studies standing as a fact.

The book starts by setting out the research design with which the project began: a specialist on China, Bunkenborg, would centre a three-pronged study alongside a Mongolia expert, Pedersen and a Mozambique specialist, Nielsen. The global China perspective could

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then be compared with the local Mongolian and Mozambique ones. The fieldwork would be conducted in pairs and then all three anthropologists would visit each site to ensure each participant had overall knowledge. It was discovered that this formal design was obstructive and productive in equal measure. Discussion of the theoretical issues involved leads to a useful disquisition on what seems to many anthropologists an obsolete model of knowledge production, the comparative method. In this case, it emerged that there was no external vantage point from which to make a comparison between the three perspectives. Since the three authors themselves reproduced the same profound epistemic divergences as occurred between the Chinese businesspeople and their Mongolian and Mozambiquan interlocutors, the initial research model was judged to have failed. It was replaced by 'a hyper-reflexive mode of enquiry whereby a certain object of study fuses with the people who study it into a single analytical reality that we denote as "collaborative damage"' (p. 17).

This failed collaboration being the main focus of the book, readers looking for substantive information about the types and degree of Chinese penetration of the Mongolian and Mozambiquan economies will not find it here. What they will discover, however, is vivid and exquisitely nuanced information about how Chinese and local actors interact in many different situations, with descriptions and dialogues revealing eager (but misplaced) attempts at closeness as well as a variety of tactics of deliberate distancing. The book contains six ethnographic chapters, the first three on diverse instances of Chinese-Mongolian relations and the following three on case studies in Mozambique. We move from a Chinese agri-businessman who cannot understand why his efforts to make friends with the locals received a stony response in the first chapter, to a Chinese mining enclosure in the Gobi Desert in chapter two. The company attempted to establish a 'flower garden style' mine, and in line with Chinese practice over centuries, planted an enclosure with trees and vegetables aiming to create a pleasant, civilised society in a benign inoffensive manner. But as Bunkenborg et. al. observe (p. 73), 'imperial affects do not depend on having imperial intentions'. The Chinese attempt to introduce a radically different landscape was experienced as an alien imposition and rejected by the Mongols – such moves towards Sinification being furthermore something they were familiar with from centuries of imperial outreach. In return, they labelled the Chinese as uncivilised, chiefly for the unceremonious and ignorant way the workers inhabited Mongolian *gers* (felt tents). The

third chapter deals with the operations of a large Chinese oil company in a remote eastern corner of Mongolia. They built a road for export of the oil by truck. But the road paradoxically served to separate the Chinese from the Mongol herders living nearby. The Mongolian habit was to maintain diverse, multi-stranded networks of relations, travelling maybe slowly, calling in at *gers* on the way. This new road was physically and conceptually narrow, designed for one purpose only (oil export). Completely foreign to the local way of life, it denoted only estrangement. The following three chapters analyse Sino-Mozambiquan encounters. A study of local perceptions of Chinese engineers contracted to build a bridge and develop a non-urbanised district is followed in chapter five by discussion of Chinese enforced hierarchy and separation at various workplaces from construction companies to sawmills and shoe shops. Chapter six offers a fascinating case study of Mozambiquan forest scouts employed to track down high value trees for Chinese timber-export companies. It turned out that intuition, ancestral spirits, secrets and occult links with the Chinese were involved, all of which were differently understood by the various agents, scrambling any attempt at an overall analysis.

Each of the six substantive chapters includes as part of the ethnography accounts of how the anthropologists could not agree about what they were seeing. Bunkenborg, who spoke Chinese, could not help seeing the point of view of the Chinese protagonists, perhaps partly because he was pushed into this position by the suspicions his conversations in Chinese generated among Mongolians and Mozambiquans who could not understand them. Meanwhile, Pedersen and Nielsen, who spoke the regional languages, tended to side with the 'anticolonial' responses of Mongols and Mozambiquans respectively.

The authors coin the concept of 'intimate distance' to denote the awkward relations and latent or real conflicts between the Mongolians, Mozambiquans and Chinese, as well as amongst themselves. They expand Anna Tsing's idea of 'zones of awkward estrangement' described in her book *Friction* (2004) firstly through a critique of anthropology's tendency to fetishize positive connectivity, pointing out that it is possible to have a *relation* (of engaged estrangement) that is not a *connection* and secondly through a self-critique of their own biases. Yet there is something unsatisfactory about the authors' claim that 'intimate distance' is only a heuristic analytical prop when they describe countless instances of it as factual interactions that they recorded. The same is true of the two further 'central concepts' that

framed their endeavour, 'enclave' and 'empire'. They conclude at the end of the book that Chinese ventures do usually end up by taking the form of self-contained enclaves detached in most ways from their surroundings; and that 'empire in the making' is indeed a fruitful way to understand Chinese globalisation, provided that the idea of empire is rethought. Their own account of empire insists that conflicts, constraints and contradictions are integral to the meaning of the idea, rather than, as in other versions, external effects that empire is subject to. In the end, the reader, at least this reader, is left unsatisfied by the implications left hanging by the authors' emphasis on self-reflexivity. For their final claim is that by making a virtue of collapsing the boundary between analytical object and analysing subject, Chinese globalisation is present not only out there but 'within and between the three of us': 'We too are the Chinese empire', they state on page 234. On the one hand, we readers can appreciate this important point about the reverberations of conflicts observed in the field within the observers; but on the other hand, the emphasis – even the fetishisation – of anthropological reflexivity and methodology leaves unanswered the status of the descriptions and analysis of whatever is 'out there'. The impression is given that Chinese globalisation in its entirety is to be understood as something in inverted commas, bracketed off by heuristic devices and the personal biases of the anthropologists. However, luckily, I think, the book does not work this way consistently throughout. The ethnographic chapters operate differently. They describe things seen and said at particular places and times, and only then discuss how the anthropologists disagreed about them. This means that the readers too can make their own judgements about these incidents and about the actual workings of Chinese globalisation.

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