01
24

SCAMMED: DISSECTING CYBER SLAVERY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

This text is taken from *Global China Pulse*: Volume 3, Issue 1, 2024.

Collaborative Damage

An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization

Mikkel Bunkenborg
Morten Nielsen
Morten Axel Pedersen

Collaborative Damage: A Conversation with Mikkel Bunkenborg and Morten Axel Pedersen

Christian SORACE,
Mikkel BUNKENBORG, and Morten Axel PEDERSEN

Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization (Cornell University Press, 2022) is the outcome of a collaborative project conducted by three Danish anthropologists on China's global impact and involvement in Mongolia and Mozambique. In the field, the anthropologists started to argue with each other and disagree over how to interpret what they saw, which became a central theme of the book. Like their interlocutors in the rapidly changing contexts of Chinese interactions with local societies, the anthropologists navigate incommensurability, misunderstanding, frustration, and friendship.

Christian Sorace: Let's start with the book's title, *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization*. While the book is about the failures of collaboration—between its authors, and between Chinese workers abroad and local communities—and how these failures can be productive of different kinds of insights, economies, and social relations, I am curious: what does *damage* highlight?

Mikkel Bunkenborg and Morten Axel Pedersen: The title of the book is obviously a play on the term 'collateral damage', so the occurrence of the word damage is partially the unintended consequence of a pun. But 'damage' is also quite apposite to the book's ethnographic focus on failures, misunderstandings, dysfunctional infrastructure, and material objects of questionable quality. Instead of describing collaborative projects as processes in which plans are realised more or less successfully and adding some observations about unintended consequences, we attempt to foreground how unforeseeable forms of socio-material excess shape the trajectories of collaborative endeavours more powerfully than pre-existing plans. Instead of producing collectivities working towards common goals, the collaborative projects we address in the book mostly splinter along faultlines that none of the participants predicted. Collaboration involves two or more parties who cannot fully know one anothers' dispositions, so plans for collaborative projects necessarily sustain some damage in the process of realisation and, judging by the plans of each party, the outcomes will look damaged or deformed. The inside view of any collaboration is bound to include the unexpected divergence from the original plan and the word damage highlights this inevitable tragedy of

collaboration. But damage also points to the comedy of excess: collaborative projects are clearly generative, they produce a superfluity of social and material effects and, while this messiness is a form of damage, it is also a positive entropy that constantly opens new interpretative and developmental trajectories. Last but not least, we wanted to convey—in keeping with Anna Tsing and others—that global capitalism, whether 'Chinese' or not, can do real damage to people's livelihoods.

CS: One of the most fascinating aspects of the book is the decision to include the *disagreements* among each of the three anthropologists about how to interpret what you were seeing (or not seeing) in the field. All the frustrations, annoyances, misunderstandings, and distances between you make for a gripping read. But, of course, it does more than that: it reproduces the incommensurable gaps in the field within the method and ethnography itself. As you put it: '[M]isunderstandings between Chinese and locals proved to be contagious' (p. 174). What I would like to discuss is how you found yourselves 'taking sides with our respective interlocutors' (p. 174). On the one hand, the answer seems simple. Bunkenborg speaks Mandarin, Pedersen speaks Mongolian, and Nielsen speaks Portuguese. Each of you is attuned to hear certain things by your training and previous fieldwork. But was identification inevitable? How do bilingual speakers fit into the dialectics of identity and otherness? Is there a space for dis-identification? Put differently, is it possible to get out of our own heads?

MB and MAP: The book describes the process whereby the authors came to sympathise with their respective interlocutors, but there is a theatrical quality to the way they take sides and rehearse opposing views, so identification may be an overly strong term. The idea of three middle-aged, middle-class anthropologists claiming and imagining to identify fully with their Mongolian, Chinese, and Mozambican informants may have been possible within the parameters of a defunct colonial anthropology in which ethnographers could get away with claiming to represent 'their' people, but there is necessarily an ironic distance involved in the authors' re-enactment of this logic in a contemporary setting. What is at stake is not so much identification as a mimetic performance of alterities, an initially playful versioning of self that goes deeper than mere playfulness but remains less totalising than identity. Along with this process of not quite identification, the book describes a process of not quite dis-identification as it chronicles the fissures and differences of opinion that emerge between the ridiculously homogeneous trio of Danish ethnographers. The disagreements were real enough but the fact that they could be contained within the framework of a jointly authored book suggests that they didn't go sufficiently deep to splinter the collaborative project entirely.

In the various field sites, the ethnographers were hardly ever the only people to speak more than one language, and the function of interpreters is certainly something we might have addressed more systematically. On one occasion, two of us noted how a bilingual Mongolian interpreter changed his bearing and gestures quite radically as he switched between languages and we wondered whether language learning is not so much a superficial addition of skills as an elicitation of an alternative version of self. There is an interesting parallel between roads and interpreters in the sense that both are commonly imagined to facilitate seamless connection and communication. We have argued elsewhere that roads are powerful tools for separation and perhaps the same might be said of interpreters and ethnographers. Rather than single identities speaking multiple languages, these are partially integrated selves that separate on the inside what they appear to connect on the outside. Certainly, we do not wish to make any claim that bilingual speakers, or anyone else, are restricted to only one identity let alone a single culture in any essentialist and normative sense. Insofar as the three ethnographers, and their interlocutors, come across as inhabiting mutually incompatible or 'radically different worlds', these differences in so-called identity and culture must be understood as the *products* of the political, economical, as well as material/infrastructural dynamics and logics described in the book.

CS: The denouement of disagreement arrives in Mozambique when the Chinese machinist and caretaker (Mr Zou) reprimands the Mozambican foreman (Célio) with a physical gesture: was it a 'slap' or was it a 'nudge'? Both anthropologists and interlocutors disagree (in fact, even Mr Zou's account of the event is self-contradictory). This scene calls to mind Clifford Geertz's famous example of *thick description*: is an eye twitch a 'blink', a 'wink', or a 'burlesque' of a wink? Could we say that Geertz took for granted the existence of a context that would offer an interpretative key, whereas here there is none? How does one adjudicate between competing versions of reality when there is no infrastructural bridge?

MB and MAP: The initial idea of systematic comparison breaks down in the course of the book as the ethnographers realise that they can find no external scales to connect their field sites. What appears intuitively as a road turns out to be asphalt junk in one social context and a training exercise in another. The implication of not having an exterior vantage point becomes particularly clear much later in the frantic attempt to determine whether a particular gesture was a slap or a nudge. Not unlike Geertz, we returned for more context only to realise that the problem with context was not that we had none, but that we had more than one. But unlike what the master of thick description believed, there was no hermeneutic solution to this *surplus of meaning*.

Accordingly, we realised that the best, and perhaps the only, way to deal with this fundamental epistemological conundrum—the fact that, far from a lack of context, there seemed to be *too much of it*—was to devise a mode of ethnographic description that faithfully conveyed this interpretative excess. In a recent review of the book, our Danish colleague Christian Lund jokingly called it 'quantum mechanics ethnography', a mode of writing where contradictory interpretations are allowed to coexist in the text and where an ambiguous gesture can figure both as a slap and a nudge without ever finding a final determination as one or the other.

CS: *Collaborative Damage* presents a picture of Chinese operations in Mongolia and Mozambique as self-enclosed worlds. The Chinese live, work, eat, breathe, sleep, and exist within (seemingly) hermetically sealed environments. They sleep in airconditioned containers. Food arrives in containers shipped from China or Ulaanbaatar. Sometimes they build gardens around their perimeters. A worker brings enough soap with him to last for two years. At one point, I think you considered theorising these spaces of Chinese globalisation as forming a 'container civilization' (p. 22) but instead went with the term 'enclave': I am curious as to why. All contact with the local population is reduced to a frictionless minimum. Of course, as you show, this is an impossible fantasy, but nevertheless, a fantasy that structures reality. Your book raises the questions: From where do the Chinese enclaves (飞地) come? Are they modular, vernacular architectural forms or afterlives of the socialist work unit (单位) and dormitory labour regime dropped into foreign contexts? Are they guarded outposts on frontiers of neo-colonial expansion and extraction? Are they symbols of the insecurity of Chinese entrepreneurs in foreign contexts? Are they desired, and legislated, by Mongolian and Mozambican government officials to limit the dangerous potential for chance encounters? Are they monuments to failed friendships?
The three of you also experienced Chinese work sites quite differently as: 'claustrophobic stuffiness' (Pedersen), 'cozy homeliness' (Bunkenborg), and a 'fundamentally alien way of being social' (Nielsen) (p. 22). This is a rather gloomy situation, isn't it? The infrastructures of globalisation are logistical connections but also 'technologies of distantiation' (p. 123), which separate and disconnect. From your book, it seems like Chinese globalisation (whether consciously or not) reproduces a racialised, ethno-national logic of peoples? Chinese workers are insulated from the 'chaos' of the local context, whereas the locals do not understand the 'alien' ways of Chinese management. What everyone is after is the right amount of distance. To me, this is an utterly depressing state of affairs. It is capitalism *plus* the reification of identity. Touching on other aspects of the book, and uncanny socialist afterlives, my final question is: *Is friendship impossible?*

MB and MAP: Our initial fascination with containers and the idea of China as a container civilisation grew from the encampments for oil workers that we encountered in Mongolia. Housing scores, sometimes hundreds, of workers in landscapes that seemed empty and inhospitable, these sites were not only built from container modules, they also appeared as self-contained as moon bases. As our fieldwork progressed, however, it became clear that Chinese work sites were often structured in response to local demands and conditions and so the trope of containers—built in China and remaining self-similar in their distribution across the globe—seemed misleading.

In contrast to containers that suggest the imposition of predetermined order and allow for limited local adaption, the term enclave seemed better suited to describe situations where the isolation of Chinese nationals grew from a variety of contingent factors including pressure from local society and restrictions imposed by companies, as well as language barriers, preconceived ideas about socialist work units, etcetera. Describing the enclaves we visited as monuments to failed friendship is true in the sense that they reflected a history of interactions where friendship mostly failed, but the word monument implies a degree of finality that does not ring entirely true. More often than not, the sites we visited in the book had assumed some of the characteristics of an enclave, but such organisational outcomes generally proved to be contingent and difficult to trace back to a singular cause. The socio-material organisation of relations, connections and disconnections, in the form of an enclave is something we attempt to present in the book as a contingent response that will not necessarily become the final template for Chinese globalisation.

As for the impossibility of friendship, there are several approaches to friendship in the book. The ethnographic approach explores how Chinese actors deploy friendship in the field, and the conclusion here is that the term—filled with aspirations for disinterested emotional attachment, Maoist political allegiance, and Confucian brotherhood—is so overdetermined that it really is impossible for any friendship to tick all the boxes at once. There is an implicit theorisation of friendship that follows the concept of intimate distance in insisting that friendship is both connection and separation. And then the story of three ethnographers' disagreements can also be read as an auto-ethnographic comment on friendship in the sense that it portrays—and mocks—stereotypically male friendship that fractures in the process of research. Friendship features in the book not as a state of reciprocal and enduring affection and trust, but as a fraught, changeable, and inherently paradoxical relation. In some ways, it is rather depressing to conclude that collaboration around Chinese globalisation fractures along linguistic faultlines, but collaborative damage hardly precludes the possibility that other kinds of allegiances and fissures may come to the fore in the future. Even if the book takes a gloomy view of the possibilities for actually realising friendship, it does document a generative desire for pursuing such relations, and with all the messy excess produced in pursuit of friendship and collaboration, there is a reasonable chance that new patterns will emerge in the future and push the tired logic of ethno-nationalist differences to the background. ●