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‘Silicon elsewheres’, for plural geographies of reinvention and technology

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Lin Zhang, The.Labor.of.Reinvention, Columbia University Press (2023), ISBN: 9780231195317, 312 pp.

Book review

Lin Zhang's The Labor of Reinvention is a wonderful addition to a small number of titles that, in the last decade or so, have sought to remap the geographies of digital innovation from outside its purported centres (Athique and Parthasarathi, 2020; Chan, 2014; Coban, 2024; Irani, 2019; Lindtner, 2020; McElroy, 2024; Nemer, 2022; Petrov, 2023; Steinberg, 2019; Wahome, 2023). Far from San Francisco, New York (Silicon Alley) and London(Silicon Roundabout), cities like Bangalore, Berlin, Cape Town, Cluj Napoca, Lagos, Santiago, Shenzhen, and Tokyo tell us the diverse stories of mimicry and ingenuity behind the globalisation of techno-capitalism. Nicknames abound: Silicon hills, beaches, peaks, plateaus, mountains, savannahs and oases illustrate the inventive vocabularies that metonymically link silicon chips to local innovation economies.

For all these ‘Silicon Elsewheres’, the San Francisco Bay Area acts as an ‘imagined’ geofuture of technological profit and technical catch up (Beckert, 2016), but also as a playbook1 to be mirrored and readapted for the purpose of local development. In fact, several Californian evangelists have packaged their wisdom into easy how-to guides for nations and cities that seek to reproduce the extraordinary network effects of Silicon Valley's regional economy (Pollio, 2020). So much so that Silicon Valley mantras and fads do not just infuse the newspeak of public officials across the globe, but also the labour of developmental and humanitarian experts (Pollio, 2022).

Against this backdrop, China is a strange outlier. On the one hand, China is often portrayed as the only other geography of digital innovation that can truly challenge the technological hegemony of the United States. Immensely successful corporate giants, the likes of Alibaba, Baidu, Meituan, Pinduoduo and Tencent, attest to Beijing's digital ascendancy.

Beyond software, Chinese hardware manufacturers too dominate markets and standards, from sophisticated 5G equipment to nimble drones. In a climate of geopolitical anxieties, hawkish pundits speak of an emerging ‘digital cold war’ and of ‘silicon blockades’ (Palmer, 2023). Yet, as Franceschini and Loubere observe, China's digital economy is often framed as an exception, an authoritarian outsider, rather than an integral part of global techno-capitalism (2022). These common analyses belie a mix of orientalism and exceptionalism, ultimately revealing very little of the conjunctures at which modes of technicity and accumulation are reinvented far from California.

Thankfully, attentive and vivid works like Lin Zhang's ethnography of platformisation and digital entrepreneurialism in China offers us a useful corrective to U.S.-centric accounts of innovation. Following urban entrepreneurs and urban histories in Beijing's Zhongguancun, rural families and officials in Taobao villages, and the daigou women that animate transnational e-commerce, Zhang places the post-2008 entrepreneurialization of Chinese society in conversation with the reinvention of China's itself. Such a reinvention, the book argues, sought to solve problems of development, redistribution, and technological independence by further integrating the country's digital economy into the most competitive forms of global techno-capitalism. To do so, it wasn’t enough for China to be the factory of the world: ‘made in China’ had to become ‘innovated in China’ (Lindtner, 2020). Achieving this goal has been a function of the industrial policies of an impressive investor state (Hong, 2017), but it has also been contingent on the reinvention of individuals as entrepreneurial citizens tasked with a new social contract of self-empowerment and techno-nationalism. As any reinvention, however, this state-led entrepreneurial trajectory has also mapped onto historical continuities: from traditional family structures, gendered relations, racial and geographic disparities, to the residual socialist obligations of developmental statecraft.

The Labour of Reinvention provides us with a counterweight to critical analyses of techno-capitalism that tend to imagine the ‘siliconisation’ (McElroy, 2024) of the world as a mobile frontier that emanates from the west and expands to the rest. Writing from, rather than just about China, as Zhang does, unsettles the universalising logics of these frontierist readings of high-tech entrepreneurialism, while foregrounding the hopes and contradictions of China's bombastic foray into the global digital economy. But as the book focuses on labour as a terrain where state-individual relations are reinvented, we do not learn much about another object of reinvention, arguably just as important – technology. In the remainder of this essay, I want to reflect precisely on this critical question: can we extend a pluralised geography of digital entrepreneurialism to digital technology itself?

Too often, as philosopher Yuk Hui suggests, anthropologically flat accounts of technicity assume a correspondence between what is made here and what is made there (Hui, 2019). After all, it is easier to challenge the universalising tendencies of complex concepts than to question the mundane categories through which we describe technical artefacts. Digital technology is also a fast-moving target, it changes as we find our focus. And yet, Hui's provocation to engage technological difference, however difficult this is, might be another useful starting point, a complementary material perspective to Zhang's lines of sight. In other words, we could ask what the techno- of techno-capitalism would look like if we displaced Silicon Valley and recentred our analysis in Silicon Elsewheres.

Full disclosure. I have been thinking about this question for some time, at least since 2019, when I embarked on the project to chart China's technological presence in Nairobi, Africa's so-called Silicon Savannah. Here, China's digital champions have found a comfortable landing pad, while scores of entrepreneurs, start-ups and renegade investors have staked their bets on the possibility of arbitraging and reinventing Chinese tech for Africa's mass markets. From digital platforms to technical standards and even hardware, Nairobi has become the test bed of a pluralised technological world where Silicon Valley offers only one of the vernaculars, not the only one, of the relation between technical change and capitalism. Of course, mine is a much more pragmatic reading of techno-diversity than Hui's cosmological take. For example, I have followed the reinvention of shanzhai affordable phones – initially Chinese knock-offs – for Africa's bottom-of-the-pyramid consumers; I have argued that, from Nairobi, this appears to be a tale of technological specification, rather than just a frontier-making effort (Pollio, 2024). Similarly, digital platforms, standards and business models experimented in Nairobi with an eye to China reveal the multiplication of concerns that shape the otherwise straightforward project of the Silicon Savannah as a crucible of made-in-Africa (techno-)capitalism (Wahome, 2023).

These differences seem all the more important when writing from places that have been historically subject to a deeply asymmetric epistemology of technicity. Clapperton Mavhunga, for example, makes the point that Africa has never been seen as a place that could produce innovation, but only as a receiver of technology from the west (2019). Not long ago, China too was portrayed as a technologically sleepy giant, as Hui and others remind us (Hui, 2019; Mullaney, 2024). Hence, Lin Zhang's invitation to think about a ‘China paradigm’ to challenge analytical categories that appear more coherent than what they truly are is especially timely. And useful, as we set off to trace other geographies of techno-capitalism, beyond the China-U.S. bifurcation. But just as we deploy these geographic alternatives to question the state, the entrepreneur, the worker and so on, so must we when it comes to technology, the often invisible matter of reinvention that also, and not less importantly, orients the making of Silicon Elsewheres.

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Note

1. I borrow this from Donald McNeill, who made the point that Silicon Valley also operates as a mobile playbook (as opposed to a mobile policy) (personal conversation).

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