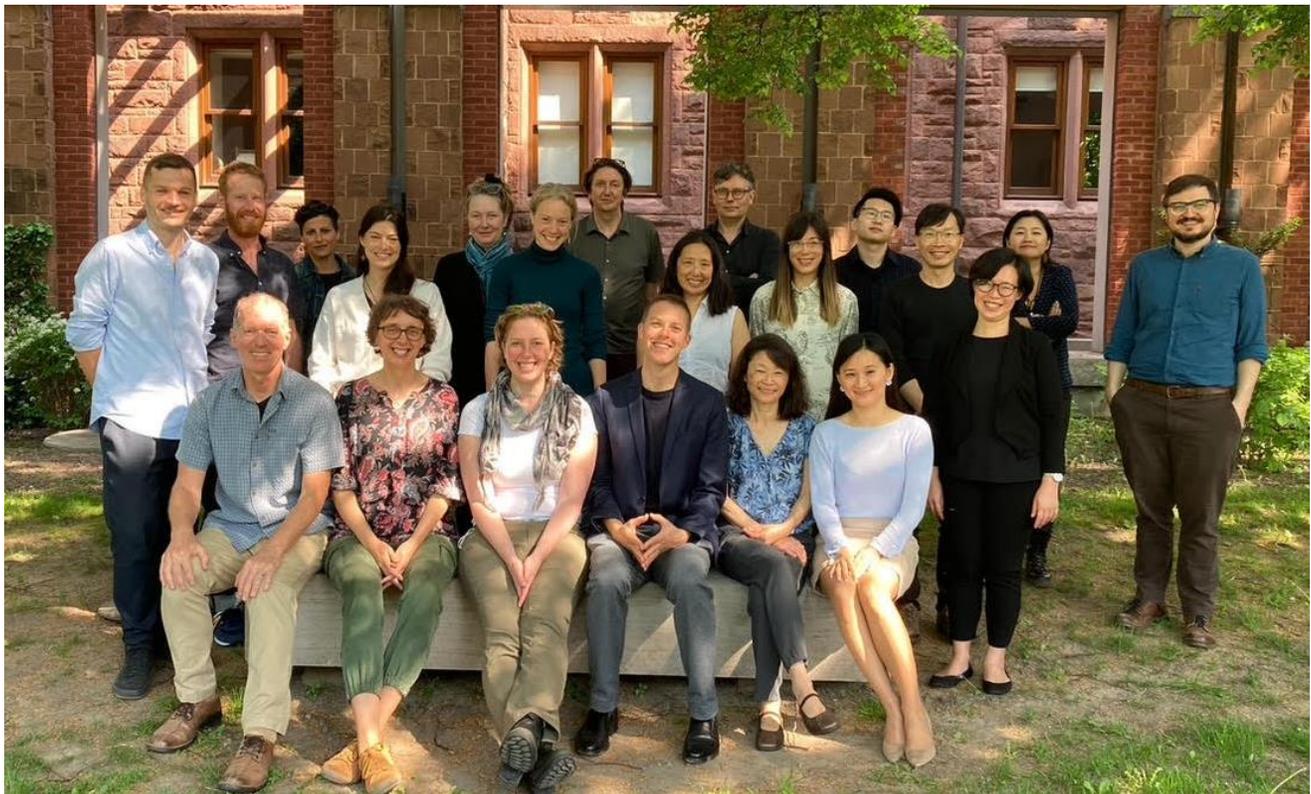

CHINAMADE BRIEF



Fourth ChinaMade Workshop: From China Model to Global China

Jessica DiCarlo & Tim Oakes, July 2022



Workshop participants at the University of Toronto, May 2022.

The culminating workshop of the ChinaMade project was co-hosted by **Tim Oakes** (University of Colorado Boulder) and **Rachel Silvey** (University of Toronto) at the University of Toronto Asian Institute, Munk School of Global Affairs.

In May 2022, scholars from across Asia, North America, and Europe met in a three-day workshop hosted by the University of Toronto and the University of Colorado Boulder to consider the empirical and conceptual meanings of ‘global China’ as well as key analytical strategies and methodological

approaches needed to study these issues. The papers presented cases that spanned from subterranean to outer space and orbital infrastructures, offering concrete examples that capture the pressing issues for critically engaging with global China. In doing so, scholars began to probe and extend the notion of Global China, and brought together themes from earlier ChinaMade workshops that conceived [infrastructure in a Chinese register](#), examined [China's domestic infrastructure](#), and explored the [lived experiences of Chinese infrastructure in Southeast Asia](#).

This workshop brought to a close the first iteration of ChinaMade. Presentations by core members of the ChinaMade team, along with roundtable discussions, assessed what the project has accomplished, evaluated the current state of research in and about China, and explored the implications and challenges of studying the 'ChinaModel' of development. Recognizing that over the course of the ChinaMade project a discourse of global China has rapidly emerged to capture the attention of the China Studies field, the workshop also sought to explore a critical engagement with this concept from a materially grounded, project-based socio-technical perspective. The workshop's second day thus offered presentations by leading experts on the meaning of global China itself, as an analytical field of inquiry, an empirical object of study, and a methodological orientation. On the workshop's final day we continued our discussions during a walk along the shores of Lake Ontario and over a Jamaican-Chinese lunch.

Several key themes emerged during our discussions.

The first, agenda-setting panel emphasized global China as a power project that needs to be understood in terms of the *diverse processes and socio-political relations that emerge out of specific projects and places*. ChinaMade's core team presented on a range of topics, from surveillance in Xinjiang, the Sky River Project, and roads in Gui'an, to amber in Yunnan, and zone genealogies. Across this panel, presenters reflected on the questions they initially set out to address within ChinaMade and how these have evolved through developments in their respective fields of research. In doing so, they brought together key findings and insights from their research alongside the broader conversations and themes that emerged throughout the three previous workshops. For example, through an analysis of weather modification across the Tibetan plateau, Emily Yeh showed that infrastructure becomes a means to escape the problems of the present. In this way, she explored global China as an infrastructure for global survival and as a means of exporting technologies and expertise. Max Hirsh used his work on international exchanges of technical expertise in Chinese airport construction to argue for a deterritorialized approach to global China. And Alessandro Rippa explored the materiality of amber and the nexus of informal trade and infrastructure construction across the China-Myanmar borderlands.

Second, the China Model can be understood as a particular *event of global capitalism*. China's infrastructure investments abroad are diverse and deeply connected to and in partnership with other transnational firms. While China may present itself as an exceptional actor on the global development stage, it remains enmeshed within, rather than separate from, the webs of global development and production. This was also reflected in the sense that analysis needs to move beyond thinking about Chinese projects abroad strictly in terms of zones, enclaves, and other exceptional spaces. While these 'infrastructure spaces' remain important platforms for the symbolic or rhetorical construction of a China Model they also can obscure other ways in which China's projects are integrated with local and regional economies. Infrastructural networks suggest pathways by which such integration can be further explored. Thus, Dorothy Tang drew on her work on industrial zones in Southeast Asia to argue for an approach to global China that pushes beyond the enclave model of zone development. And Darren Byler drew on his work on 'convenience policing' in Xinjiang to extend an analytic of global China as an event coincident with (but not reducible to) the event of global surveillance capitalism.

At the same time, however, workshop participants kept returning to the theme of *infrastructural disconnection and blockage* as an important rejoinder to the assumption that China's infrastructure investments always necessarily enhance connectivity and improve access for people in the places where projects are implemented. Tim Oakes showed how precarity was built into the infrastructural grid in Gui'an, as large empty highways were constructed through local fields and offered no access for practical use. In response, local people built "hacker roads" onto the highway. Such hacker roads among Kazakh communities living near new highways in Xinjiang were also explored by Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi. Although Chinese infrastructure promises connectivity and speed, these notions clash with actual disconnection and delay on the ground. Joniak-Lüthi considered the ruins of older development campaigns in borderland regions and asked whether today's Belt & Road projects are destined for the same unmaintained state in the near future.



Many participants raised additional tensions that can be encapsulated through a lens of *hybridity* – for example, simultaneous formality/informality, legality/illegality, and connection/disconnection. Miriam Driessen drew on the concept of hybridity from postcolonial theory to make sense of power dynamics in Ethiopia, suggesting that global China is best understood as a series of “contact zones.” Julie Klinger’s work on critical-energy minerals showed that rather than a hard barrier between legal and illegal, actual practices of extraction and processing are improvised, contingent and selectively compliant. In this way, global China occurs through at times contradictory and at others complementary articulations between state-driven processes and state-avoiding processes. Discussants also suggested, contrary to mainstream views of China as powerful and top-down, that projects are complex manifestations of the interplay between top-down/bottom-up forces and state capital/diasporic petty capital. Hybridity thus becomes a useful and key theme here to avoid reducing global China to the PRC and the practices or intentions of the state and of state capitalism. Along these lines, Tong Lam reflected on the idea of global China as ‘open source’ rather than contained within the control of state capitalism.

It was clear across presentations that there are a huge range of projects that help us make sense of global China. Within this diversity of projects, we can look at surprising and paradoxical moments to better understand the contingent and spatially variegated nature of China's impacts abroad. Rippa's work on global amber circulations revealed that rather than a state-driven enterprise, amber and the ways people trade and use it as a store of value shows a *lack* of trust in the state, even as amber drives other state-led investments. In another example, Julie Chu described the **absent presence**: the non-places and thin socializations of the global within China. How might we study infrastructure spaces that are largely empty? Take, for example, the absent presence within China 'offshore' or within unfinished spaces, or infrastructures promised but unbuilt. Similarly, Joniak-Lüthi focused on absences and what they can tell us – in her words, “silenced subjects” like *maintenance, decay, and disrepair*.

Several presentations pointed to *the global within China*, in other words, how China's domestic political economy is itself 'global.' Taking this approach involves more than China's going out, and instead how practices within China's borders are constituted through global forces. This entails examining how transnational actors, interests, and politics shape events within China. Chu noted, for example, how global engagements produce certain kinds of empty spaces within China itself (such as

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empty homes built with remittances sent from workers abroad, or largely automated, de-socialized and securitized 'free trade' ports). Bennett explored China's global ambitions in remote sensing and how these fuel agendas for social management and discipline with China. And Rippa noted the global circulations of the amber trade and how these helped us understand the limitations of Chinese statecraft.

Another tension that arose in workshop discussions was between ideas of **'planetary' versus 'global' China**. Presentations on remote and social sensing, weather modification, energy minerals offered a sense of the very planetary scale of Chinese engagements. Making this distinction turned our

thinking toward the materialities through which 'the global' is constituted. The idea of a planetary China drew upon those materialities (pieces of amber, coaxial cables, rare earths, remotely sensed data) and challenged some of the abstraction inherent in the idea of the global. But planetary also helped us think about the extra-planetary aspects of China's development ambitions, along with the subterranean dimensions as well. A more volumetric approach thus emerged from some of these discussions.

A special panel focused on *China's engagements in Indonesia*. These included AbdouMaliq's reflections on the power of rumors swirling around China's supposed plans to build a new city outside of Jayapura, Rachel Silvey's intervention on the continuing relevance of Chinese political theater, and Johan Lindquist's research on the grounded complexities of click farming and what implications we might draw as China seeks to expand its digital investments abroad. Finally, of particular salience, participants reflected on the **post-covid methodological landscape**, raising the limitations of solely ethnographic approaches. Discussions centered on how to carry out remote and digital research amidst ongoing restrictions on personal mobility, particularly within China itself. If we are doing more digital platforms and remote work then what does grounded, place-based research mean in those places?

Overall, global China may be best understood as a *research orientation* and *methodological framework*, which yields understanding of diverse processes in place, rather than a fully-formed empirical object that is ‘global China.’ Participants represented a range of disciplines including geography, anthropology, sociology, history, politics, and urban planning, which inevitably led to discussions on methods. Decidedly trans-disciplinary in orientation, an approach to global China, as Ching Kwan Lee suggested, “emphasizes the ‘global’ context, conditions, and impetuses of Chinese developments ... It is thus an analytical strategy that helps us overcome the long-standing methodological nationalism that has plagued China studies, area studies and the social sciences in general.”

Our task for this workshop, then, was not to answer the question of ‘what is global China?’ Rather, global China, far from an empirical object in itself, is about how things work on the ground -- the processes, practices, and ways they often operate in tension. Lee thus characterized global China as manifesting through *power, projects, and policy* (see a published version of her comments [here](#)). The horizon for studies of global China is expansive. As we continue to emphasize grounded, place-based research that reflects and is connected to global processes and political economy, a multiple of other areas of research will continue to expand this field. For example, the final panel raised issues of race and gendered imaginaries of global China, pointing to fruitful areas for future research. As the field evolves a strength it will continue to off is how to challenge dominant narratives. While the ChinaMade project itself will be brought to a close, it has established a research agenda that will serve as a foundation for on-going work on China’s global footprint, from a place-based, and project-based perspective.

Participants and presentations

Introduction: Reflecting on ChinaMade

Presentation by **Darren Byler** (Simon Fraser University), **Max Hirsh** (University of Hong Kong), **Tim Oakes** (University of Colorado Boulder), **Alessandro Rippa** (Tallin University), **Dorothy Tang** (National University of Singapore), **Emily T. Yeh** (University of Colorado Boulder)
 Commentary by **Yang Yang** (National University of Singapore) and **Juan Du** (University of Toronto)

Panel 1: Conceiving Global China

What is Global China? - **Ching Kwan Lee** (UCLA)
 Hybridity in Global China - **Miriam Driessen** (Oxford University)
Discussant: Diana Fu (University of Toronto)

Panel 2: Other Chinas

Global China, Chinese globe: pixelating the celestial empire - **Mia Bennett** (University of Washington)
 Subterranean and orbital dimensions of China’s global integration - **Julie Klinger** (University of Delaware)
 Offshore: the chronotope and transnational hauntings of Chinese absent presence - **Julie Chu** (University of Chicago)
Discussant: Deborah Cowen (University of Toronto)

Panel 3: Extensions

Maintaining roads and relations in Chinese central Asia - **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi** (University of Bern)
 China in Motion - **Tong Lam** (University of Toronto)
Discussant: Jessica DiCarlo (University of British Columbia)

Panel 4: On Global China's Edge: Indonesia

Facing the Pacific: What it would mean to release Jayapura to this view - **AbdouMaliq Simone**
(University of Sheffield)

'Global China' in and out of place - **Abidin Kusno** (York University)

Click Farms' in Indonesia and beyond: infrastructure, automation, and labor at the edge of the
platform economy - **Johan Lindquist** (Stockholm University)

Discussant: Joshua Barker (University of Toronto)

Other workshop participants included: **Alana Boland** (University of Toronto), **Zixian Liu** (University of Toronto), **Anthea Mulakala** (The Asia Foundation) **Galen Murton** (James Madison University), **Nadine Plachta** (University of Toronto), **Katharine Rankin** (University of Toronto), and **Edward Schatz** (University of Toronto).