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## **A Collaborative Ethnography on Transnational Capitalist Collaborations**

Rofel, Lisa, and Sylvia J. Yanagisako. 2018. *Fabricating Transnational Capitalism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Italian-Chinese Global Fashion*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 392 ISBN: 978-1-4780-0045-7

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*Fabricating Transnational Capitalism* is remarkable not only for its convincing argument but also for its form: the book is a collaborative ethnography about capitalist transnational collaborations. It is the outcome of a shared, multi-sited and long-term research project on collaborations between Chinese and Italian fashion firms, and will be of interest to anyone interested in processes of globalization. It contains a mix of co-authored and single-authored chapters by the main authors, Lisa Rofel and Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, supplemented with a chapter by fashion studies scholar Simona Segre Reinach.

The co-authored introduction classically starts with a description of a social event, an Italian fashion show in China, followed by an outline of the book's analytical framework. Rofel and Yanagisako have separately studied silk industries in China and Italy respectively since 1984. The current book builds on the authors' previous work, both empirically and analytically, such as Yanagisako's seminal conceptual work on kinship and gender and Rofel's influential book on neoliberal subjectivities in China. The authors have moreover collaboratively studied Italian fashion firms in China since 2002. They argue against perceiving transnational capitalist collaborations as an articulation of two distinct capitalist systems. The authors understand

capitalism to be dynamic and contingent, not predetermined by a certain (national) economic logic, but enabled, constrained and shaped by cultural practices and sentiments.

Rofel and Yanagisako argue that it is their collaboration – which seems to have taken place primarily at the level of analysis rather than during actual fieldwork – that has enabled them to transcend common understandings of transnational capitalism. They point at their complementary linguistic skills and their combined knowledge on the different settings the Italian and Chinese entrepreneurs come from. Whereas the empirical value of their collaboration is clear, it does not always transpire that this combined perspective was a sine qua non for their analytic insights. In my opinion, the analytic value of their collaboration is most convincingly present in the first section of the book.

Section I, titled "The Negotiation of Value," consists of an extensive co-authored chapter on manager's labor value. It describes career trajectories of Italian and Chinese managers, the changing division of labor between them, and their perceptions of themselves and each other. While the Italians emphasize their "Italianness" which is equated to fashion-ability (a skill that would not make their labor particularly noteworthy or valuable in Italy), the Chinese emphasize their cosmopolitanism, their overcoming of their "Chineseness," which represents cheap rather than managerial labor. Thus, the authors' collaborative approach, which reveals differential perspectives in such negotiations, shows that labor power (in the sense of capacities) is not pre-given but formed in the encounter and is based in the managers' mutual interdependence within existing hierarchies.

Section II, titled "Historical Legacies and Revisionist Histories," argues against perceiving transnational capitalism as radically different from previous forms of capitalism. Whereas transnational collaborations might occur more frequently than they did before, they are shaped by historical legacies and by specific understandings of the (non-)capitalist past, that for instance determine how parties involved perceive the role of the state in capitalist enterprise. Rofel's chapter in this section shows how young Chinese entrepreneurs' interpretation of China's socialist past have led them to embrace capitalism and to seek for joint ventures with foreign firms as a way to overcome (power) inequalities. Yanagisako's chapter emphasizes the legacies of the decentralized structure of production by family firms in Italy, which led Italians to look for multiple partners in China, to the dismay of their existing partners. The chapter thus shows that

distrust or conflicts in transnational collaborations are not an inevitable result of cultural misunderstandings but stem from specific and contingent histories that shape the strategies and expectations of those involved. Finally, Segre Reinach's chapter, based on the same interview material as the rest of the book, discusses the changing meaning of Italian fashion in China. Whereas Italian firms and their joint ventures with Chinese firms initially sourced material and produced in China for foreign markets, they at a later stage also produced for the domestic market. Chinese-Italian relations became more collaborative but also more competitive at this point, indicating that the collaborations themselves are dynamic, if persistently asymmetrical.

Section III, straightforwardly titled "Kinship and Transnational Capitalism," discusses how kinship is integral to both Chinese and Italian enterprises, albeit in highly different ways. Yanagisako's chapter describes two types of "generation" that used to ensure the perseverance of family businesses in Italy, but which are affected differently by transnational expansion. On the one hand, the succession of generations within family firms has been secured in those firms successful in a transnational context. On the other hand, whereas the demise of firms previously gave individual family members the opportunity to start anew and thus generated new firms, there is little demand for small subcontracting firms in Italy anymore. This "generation" of firms is no longer possible, effectively restricting possibilities for social mobility. In China, in contrast, there are increasing opportunities for small entrepreneurs, as described in Rofel's chapter in this section. These new firms might promote themselves as "family firms" towards (potential) Italian partners, but they usually avoid at all cost to be perceived as such by other Chinese in order to avoid accusations of corruption. Rofel argues that the ambiguous relation between the state, family and business has to be seen in the light of the legacies of the socialist past yet is also shaped by the entrance of Italian firms that evaluate family firms positively. The chapters in this section contradict narrow views on capitalism that perceive capitalist enterprise as solely focused on financial profit without taking possible affective and social benefits or ethical discussions on inequality into account.

The chapters in Section III are for a considerable part based on data from Yanagisako's and Rofel's previous research. Indeed, to me, the distinctive strength of the book is that it draws on longitudinal research on the fashion industry in both China and Italy and on a decades-long conceptual engagement with the topic of capitalism. Whereas the authors refer to this earlier work, they hardly discuss the particularities of their collaboration. For instance, the contribution

of Segre Reinach to the collaboration remains somewhat elusive, insightful as her chapter is. The book would have made an even stronger case for the method of collaborative ethnography if it had contained a more explicit reflection on the authors' respective positions, possibly points of disagreement and the resulting analytic value of the method. After all, as the authors themselves argue for capitalist collaborations, it matters greatly who the collaborators are and what kind of (scholarly) histories they bring to the project. It is, however, clear that in this case it is only because of the authors' decades of dedication to their respective research contexts that they have been able to provide such a comprehensive understanding of the shifts in Italian-Chinese capitalist collaborations in the fashion industry.

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