

PINHEIRO-MACHADO, Rosana. 2017. *Counterfeit itineraries in the global south: the human consequences of piracy in China and Brazil*. London/New York, Routledge.

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In *Counterfeit itineraries*, Pinheiro-Machado offers a vivid anthropological account of the world system beyond the traditional lenses of core and periphery. In fact, she refuses such a binary perspective while recognizing the material and historical conditions of the current international division of labor that undergird the global political economy and inform the channels of commodity circulation. She doesn't simply replace that view with a reductionist argument about globalization as the intensification of flows and cultural hybridization either. Rather, she provides a detailed and powerful analysis of a transnational commodity circuit across the Global South – from China to Brazil via Paraguay – by exploring the frictions of the global discourse on intellectual

property, law enforcement, trade routes, national economic policies, cross-border practices, localized sociabilities, and adapting selves. That is to say, “the invisible human experience that created a transnational commodity circuit in the Global South, and the dialectical relationship through which people and value constituted each other” (p. 2).

Intrigued by the layers of value and feelings attached to an electronic Santa that travelled variegated landscapes of industrialization and informalities between Asia and South America before it was given to her as a Christmas decoration gift, she performs ethnographies of the production, distribution, and consumption in transnational circuits of Chinese cheap goods. As we are told, the book is a “journey in search of Santa over time and space” (p. 4). Such a journey inquires into the social lives of commodities always-already in motion, their social dimensions, and the uneven geographies of capitalism across the Global South. Drawing from the notion of “methodological fetishism,” *Counterfeit Itineraries* traces back “ordinary and tangible objects against the alienating idea of globalization” (p. 17). It ultimately seeks to unveil the politics of value and regimes of value in this transnational circuit – that is, respectively “how various elites and global powers try to control and limit their exchange and consumption, while popular forces try to expand them” and “the cultural, social, and temporal milieus through which they circulate” (p. 2).

The analysis is equally attentive to transnational manifestations as well as micro textures of everyday life. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Pinheiro-Machado travels back and forth between different levels of analysis, eventually demonstrating how these seemingly disconnected manifestations and textures are mutually constitutive and indeed fused. While the broad story told in the book regards the functioning and collapse of a transnational commodity route, her account is richly anchored in the social, cultural, economic, political, and emo-

tional dimensions of the myriad actors involved in this circuit including the ethnographer herself. In this sense, the book is inspiring for teaching lessons about the ethnographer's critical sensibility and positionality awareness: the book does "shed light on macro- and micro-processes that changed the narratives about my informants, their goods, and eventually myself" (p. 19)

By traveling back from the end node of this commodity circuit in Brazil to a trade outpost in Paraguay and finally to production sites in China, the book brings together the fieldwork data and analysis of three distinct deep ethnographies Pinheiro-Machado conducted in fifteen years. The first one revolves around the hardships and sociabilities of street vendors in Porto Alegre (Brazil) who made their livelihoods selling imports. Pinheiro-Machado elaborates on how these workers' selves are reconfigured by changes in the value attached to the commodities, and conversely how emotions constantly re-create value along routes of commodity circulation. For example, cheap goods sold by street vendors are deemed (more) authentic not in relation to the examination of their origin or the regulatory framework that applies at the moment of production but the knowledge, trust, and difficulties implied in obtaining these goods in Paraguay and struggling to sell them "na pedra" [literally "on the stone", meaning sidewalks and other public spaces]. Sharing the same precarious work conditions, which often causes similar distresses and harm to these vendors' health, requires the maintenance of affective and strategic ties necessary to accomplish mundane activities of social reproduction such as eating and going to the bathroom. In this context, people "marginalized from and immiserated by urban life" attend to each other and collaborate economically, as Simone (2004, p. 407) reminds us with the notion of "people as infrastructure." Also, disciplining structures of feeling such as uncertainty and fear are "the grounds from which vendors make claims to

urban space," as Tucker (2017, p. 733) points out in regards to the case of street vendors in this commodity circuit.

Complex social relations between fellow co-workers, competing vendors, importers, traders, smugglers, buyers, and producers are condensed in the travelling commodity – but not fixed in time. Comradeship and competition, solidarity and group distinction are not resolved easily in these work spaces. Rather, emotional relations are re-worked through the commodity value. For instance, Brazil's adoption of the global discourse on intellectual property changes the perception of value attached to commodities, which in turn impact on group boundaries and solidarity. As crackdown on piracy resulted in tougher law enforcement, criminalization of street vendors, and conflation between shoddy trinkets, smuggled goods, and pirated items, her informants eventually reinforced these representations of commodity value. They translate such representations differently into distinct groups of street vendors, creating boundaries between those who allegedly sell counterfeits and themselves who claim to sell cheap but nonetheless legitimate goods. As we read in the book, throughout the commodity circuit "value construction and economic activity are treated here as total social facts that condense power, moralities, feelings, belongings, kinship, networks, labor, leisure, competition, exploitation, and solidarity" (p. 3).

Pinheiro-Machado traveled with her informants overnight in organized bus trips to the border cities of Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil) and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay). In her second ethnographic project, when she also lived in the borderlands, she performed a research about the role of Chinese migrants in selling imports to *sacoleiros* who smuggle them into Brazil. *Sacoleiros*, literally "baggers", are "low-income traders" (p. 3) who travel to places such as Ciudad del Este in order to purchase goods that are eventually resold elsewhere. In the case of Ciudad del Este, a

city that has played a pivotal role as a trade hub due to exceptional tariff elimination and tax reliefs, the border economy is predicated upon the fact that *sacoleiros* such as Porto Alegre's street vendors purchase imports on the Paraguayan side of the border and smuggle them to Brazil. Interestingly some of the most revealing situations Pinheiro-Machado describes about the shifting grounds of border enforcement after Brazil's adoption of the global discourse on intellectual property are accounts of her ethnography on the move, moments when she experienced herself the frictions along the routes of commodities and traders rather than stationary observation sites. In these routes, fear and anxieties are lived collectively, for instance when robbers raided the bus and Pinheiro-Machado had a gun pointed at her head. Border enforcement is no less dramatic, and it creates tensions and violence in the multiple times a day *sacoleiros* (and the ethnographer) crisscross the border carrying imports with them. Due to the war on piracy, border enforcement was re-spatialized and extended hundreds of miles within Brazilian territory: state officials stop buses, inspect imports, and chase down *sacoleiros* now turned into criminals.

Conducting fieldwork Ciudad del Este, Pinheiro-Machado faces another kind of violence, the gendered violence of male informants who attempt to deny the seriousness of the academic purposes and violates the ethnographer's dignity, something that also occurred in her fieldwork in China albeit with particularities in each setting. In spite of these frustrations, and particularly in regards to the diasporic Chinese entrepreneurs in Ciudad del Este, Pinheiro-Machado explores further the tensions that emerge between different waves of Chinese migrants who are a visible group of importers and shopkeepers in Ciudad del Este. Entrepreneurship is resignified through reinterpretations of Confucianism's notions of sacrifice in juxtaposition to a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. Against this backdrop, competing claims of Chineseness between the minoritarian

group of newly arrived mainlanders and the larger community of Taiwanese results in the "taiwanization of the mainlanders" (p. 93). By doing so, Pinheiro-Machado touches on two fundamental issues of the Chinese trade-migration nexus: how Chinese migration is embedded in a diffused transnationalism anchored in multiple nodes along emerging trade routes, and how these migratory experiences contribute to the making of what one could call neoliberal subjectivity among Chinese migrants and diasporic Chinese (Ong, 2006; Ho & Boyle, 2015).

Finally, Pinheiro-Machado moved to China to conduct her third ethnography where she traces the shifts in the production sphere of these commodities *en route*. Her account reveals the contours of neoliberalism in export-led industrializing China from the vantage point of the heterogeneous experiences of factory owners and migrant workers. She visited manufacturing plants and dormitories in Shenzhen (Guangdong Province), and attended banquets and parties that are equally revealing of the production of commodities in the River Pearl Delta. The main argument is not surprising and nonetheless disturbing: factory owners' leisure time and conspicuous consumption are predicated upon the exploitation of migrant workers. Furthermore *Counterfeit Itinerary* shows how Chinese businesspeople are alienated from the production of the goods they sell in a stark contrast with the migrant workers' immersion in the goods and their sacrifice for a post-socialist country's development model based on sweatshops and manufactured exports. If "cheap commodities sustained a lifestyle of luxury," "the notion of sacrifice – so present in my informants' personal narratives in South America – was transformed and transferred to employees in the Chinese factories" (pp. 19-20). Pinheiro-Machado juxtaposes the tensions in the relations of production with the frictions in the circulation of commodities through the hands of migrant traders. By doing so, she illustrates the uneven conditions of

mobility and the perniciousness of its differential effects, what migration scholars also point out when looking from the lens of critical mobility studies (McNevin, 2014).

Counterfeit Itineraries also sheds light on the importance of *guanxi* (which can be roughly translated as social relations, but has been subjected to many interpretations) as social capital that is an integral part of entrepreneurship in today's China, and a mechanism that creates and reproduces inequalities. More specifically, the book shows how forging personal networks is seen as part of productive work. For factory owners in Shenzhen, she says, "the line between leisure and work is very thin. In Bourdieu's sense, cultivating *guanxi* in a conspicuous sociality is a way of accumulating both symbolic and social capital" (p. 115). Pinheiro-Machado goes against China scholars who see *guanxi* as corruption, and locates them in a broader gift economy composed by members of an emerging economic elite and state officials, based on reciprocity ties created through shared experiences of conspicuous consumption and a lifestyle of luxury. In this rapidly changing China, an articulation of personal ties and notions of intellectual property, both instrumentalized by private actors and the state officials alike, is also the grounds for reinterpretations of national belonging. In this vein, *Counterfeit Itineraries* adds ethnographic insights in a growing literature on the ability to enterprise in neoliberalizing China and among the Chinese diaspora (see Harvey, 2007, qt. in p. 10; Kipnis, 2007; Zhang & Ong, 2008, qtd. in p. 124; Nonini, 2008; Ren, 2010).

Throughout the book, Pinheiro-Machado shows how informalities undergird the social lives of commodities. For instance, production processes are characterized by precarious work relations in Chinese factories, and migrant workers are partially deprived of citizenship rights, labor protection, and access to welfare policies. Also, *guanxi* ties between businesspeople and state officials are crucial part of

the social relations of production in China's industrializing Southern coastal areas. Authentic goods and copies are manufactured in the same factory floors. Informalities are also ubiquitous in the distribution circuits of these goods: smuggling across national borders, escaping border enforcement, and vending in the streets. However, understood from a critical point of view as Pinheiro-Machado reminds us, informalities are always multiple and an integral part of capital as it transforms itself into and travels in the commodity form through offshore production and trade circuits of the globalized economy. *Counterfeit Itineraries* exposes the ways in which the intellectual property discourse reframes the debate on informality – typically discussed in development terms – as a regime of truth that similarly fictionalizes and normalizes the status quo, in this case under the rubrics of property, authenticity, legitimacy, and legality. If informality was the grammar used to categorize economies as underdeveloped according to the myth of a modernization yet to be achieved, the intellectual property discourse has now been deploying the same language and reinforcing the "legal dualism" of formal/informal or legal/illegal to "[sustain] a wider economic canon of the twenty-first century: that of neoliberalism – the doctrine of the free market, the advocacy of tariff elimination, currency deregulation, and the strong enforcement of private material and immaterial property" (p. 10). In this sense, notions of informality have been serving the purposes of maintaining inequalities in the world system from developmentalism to neoliberalism by virtue of controlling production costs, distribution channels, and consumption power.

Counterfeit Itineraries' main argument that the global discourse on intellectual property and the fight against piracy in Brazil contributed to the collapse of the circuit of Chinese commodities to Porto Alegre via Paraguay cannot be underestimated. Ciudad del Este no longer occupies a central role in the routes of cheap Chinese commodities making

their way to Brazil, with the remarkable exception of cigarettes and electronics. Streets, stores, and malls in the Paraguayan city are rather empty nowadays. The crackdown on piracy and its pernicious effect of criminalizing street vendors make the travels to Ciudad del Este prohibitively expensive and dangerous. In Porto Alegre, street vendors have been relocated to officially designated areas where they can work and transformed into (creditless) micro-entrepreneurs at their own risk. These changes eventually suffocated her informants' businesses. As Elyachar (2010) points out in regards to an "informal" market in the Global South, the value that is collectively construed in these settings is affected by processes of accumulation by dispossession in which vendors turned into entrepreneurs are dispossessed of very conditions to work and their support networks. Yet at the same time street markets at the edges of legality mushroomed in many cities of Brazil, where Chinese goods (now predominantly imported via Brazilian ports) are abundant and Chinese migrants are also trading. This is in spite of the fight against piracy that is also salient in these places, and the harmful consequences to the vendors in these markets that are similar to the ones seen in Porto Alegre (criminalization, confiscation, eviction etc.). Often, legality is deployed as a governing tool in such markets that – rather than collapsing due to neoliberalization – are capitalized upon by transnational flows of capital, goods, and people, as Elyachar (2010) also reminds us.

Perhaps the book's main shortcoming is, however, that when analyzing Ciudad del Este's role in the commodity circuit from the point of view of *sacoleiros* and Chinese migrant entrepreneurs it misses the opportunity to further inquire into the political economy of this border, and how the conditions are set up in the first place for imports to travel from the hands of the latter to the former. A historical analysis of Ciudad del Este shows that evolving legislation managed to make the city a

trade hub, precisely the purpose of its creation in 1957, due to tariff elimination and tax relief¹. Price differentials, border arbitrage, and smuggling imports into Brazil's then protected economy were at the roots of the possibilities to profit and profiteer. The book does not discuss, for instance, how Paraguay considers the trade of cheap goods a driver to development unlike Brazil and similar to China. Moreover the policies deployed by Paraguay and China vary immensely precisely because of the role each economy has in different times and spaces in the global political economy. Had more attention been paid to the conditions that enabled Paraguay to play the pivotal role in the trade of Chinese commodities to Brazil, the book's argument would be more accurate and complete.

If border enforcement is a performative spectacle that signals the collapse of the *sacoleiro* trade in Porto Alegre, the demise of the trade via Paraguay and the rerouting of Chinese goods in Brazil are also inescapable results of other shifts too. These shifts include the liberalizing policies in Brazil and the changes in regional Mercosur policies that effectively neutralized in the late 1990s and 2000s most of the price differentials and possibilities for arbitrage. Ciudad del Este's role as a dollar-based outpost in the *sacoleiro* circuit achieved its heyday when the Brazilian currency Real was adopted, and suffered greater effects from the its devaluation (the first major crisis that impacted the border economy was in 1997) and economic recession in Brazil. Once the product – and cause – of an ultraliberalized Paraguay whose economy relies on (re)exportation, the city was doomed to be short-lived due to another global discourse, the one on trade liberalization.

To be fair, Pinheiro-Machado does recognize that multiple elements come into play for the collapse of the commodity circuit via Paraguay, including tariff elimination. However, these elements are not critically assessed in the same way that she does with political economic aspects that factor in the

making of commodities production in China and distribution in Porto Alegre. As a result, some of the social, political, and economic relations at the border remain rather fetishized at the expense of the book's careful analyses of *sacoleiros* and Chinese entrepreneurs that work this border. For instance, such an assertion exemplifies this obfuscation by taking for granted the possibilities to perform "hard work" at the Paraguay/Brazil border: "[t]he whole circuit worked to lower the price of goods: the labor-intensive regime in the factories in China, the hard work of migrant shop owners in Paraguay, and the street vendors' 'self-exploitation' in Brazil" (p. 3). Chinese shopkeepers' hard work and sacrifice might be the reason of individual profits and inform the clash of claims on Chineseness by Taiwanese and mainlanders. However, it seems not to be enough to have made Ciudad del Este a crucial node in this commodity circuit as much as the tariff and tax policies that deliberately and actively transformed the city in a trade outpost. Frictions in such a commodity circuit are multiple, and as much as the book brilliantly expounds them, it would be further complemented by unveiling how the way for imports on the move has been paved in Ciudad del Este.

None of this invalidates the arguments made in *Counterfeit Itineraries*. Rather, this shows how ethnographies such as Pinheiro-Machado's shed light on multiple dimensions of convoluted processes condensed in commodities circuits, revealing often invisibilized Southern geographies of capitalism.

All in all, this book is highly recommended to all sociologists of globalization, development scholars, ethnographers of the global political economy, China experts, and economic anthropologists. Also, scholars interested in a range of topics should engage with Pinheiro-Machado's contributions in this book, most notably informality, intellectual property, value, emotions, diaspora entrepreneurship, and global commodity chains. Finally, readers of methodological fetishism and multi-sited ethnog-

raphy can learn from *Counterfeit Itineraries'* rigorous methodological lessons.

Note

1. Most remarkable tariff and tax regimes that have been shaping Ciudad del Este's role as a trade outpost are the Border Clearance Regime and Transient Customs Clearance Regime in the 1970s, and especially the 1990's Special Tourist Regime. The latter was adopted to further lower tariffs and taxes on imports to be resold for foreigners precisely on the verge of the liberalization of the Brazilian economy. At the same time, the Paraguayan government fought hard to give Ciudad del Este a last breath also in the scope of the negotiations of the Mercosur agreement. Eventually, Paraguay managed to instrumentalize both the Adaptation Regime conceded by Mercosur to the country and Paraguay's list of exception to the Mercosur's Common External Tariff to keep the border trade alive. Later, the Paraguayan Border Commerce Regime was adopted in accordance with Brazil's 2008 Unified Tax Regime, and the Maquila Regime was implemented. Ciudad del Este had free trade zones in two occasions the city's early history, and currently has another two, a fact that leads to misunderstandings about the border trade, inaccurately attributing it to free trade zones. The self-proclaimed slogan "Ciudad del Este is the world's biggest free trade zone" contributes to further alienate the history of the city.

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