Cosmopolitanism and the global economy: notes from China's knowledge factories

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In Dalian Software Park, China's centre for IT-enabled outsourcing and offshore services, knowledge workers find themselves on the 'assembly line' of information processing, carrying out highly routinized, de-skilled, and poorly paid work for which they are vastly overqualified. Following the recent attention to culture and personhood in studies of global capitalism, I argue that these knowledge workers are motivated by two forms of cosmopolitanism: corporate cosmopolitanism, the capacity to reconcile the supra-territorial values of 'global' corporate culture with local values; and nationalist cosmopolitanism, whereby individual workers see the performance of cultural openness as a way of contributing to China's national project of modernization. As well as providing a rare account of cosmopolitanism in the workplace, this article demonstrates the significance of cosmopolitanism for the global economy. The pursuit of cosmopolitanism creates a productive friction between individual projects of self-making, corporate projects of disciplining labour, as well as national projects of pursuing modernity and development.

Dalian Software Park (DLSP) is one of the many information technology (IT) hubs that have been set up in China in the last twenty years as part of a concerted effort to shift China's economy 'up the value chain', away from a reliance on manufacturing, towards industries driven by science and innovation. An abundance of IT graduates and a raft of economic incentives have seen DLSP attract well-known technology companies such as IBM, Oracle, Cisco, and SAP. Yet, not all the activities in the software park could be classed as 'high-tech' or 'high-value'. As well as coding and software programming, there are service centres dedicated to back-office work. In pursuit of cost savings, multinational companies have looked to offshore business processes, especially those of support functions, thereby creating new spaces of the global economy. Inside low-rise buildings of glass and steel, Chinese knowledge workers find themselves labouring on the 'assembly line' of information processing. Highly specialized and repetitive, their daily work may involve uploading timesheets, scanning résumés, or calculating insurance contributions. Flows of capital, information, and labour converge, demonstrating the power of information and communication technologies.

But technological advances alone cannot explain what makes these offshore service platforms possible, what makes them thinkable and profitable. Also crucial are cultural forms, in particular the imaginaries and figurations of cosmopolitanism.

By cosmopolitanism I refer not to a 'philosophy of freedom' (Rapport 2010) or a 'universal morality' (Appiah 2006), but rather to the 'capacity to reach beyond cultural difference' (Fardon 2008: 238), a stance of 'cultural openness' (Hannerz 1990; Wardle 2010) and the development of a 'dialogic imagination' (Beck 2002). In this article, I examine cosmopolitanisms, plural, that are being produced in DLSP, where we find almost half of the enterprises are foreign companies. The Western enterprises especially promote a 'global' corporate culture among their employees, to suggest that these workplaces could be located anywhere. Corporate imperatives of 'being global' seek to instil supra-territorial values often associated with an elite, transnational class (Friedman & Friedman 2013). I refer to this as 'corporate cosmopolitanism'. At the same time, Chinese knowledge workers pursue individual projects of becoming cosmopolitan which are informed by the national project of modernization that is being promoted by the Chinese state. In this form, cosmopolitanism indexes China's development and progress vis-à-vis advanced industrial nations (Fong 2011). I refer to this as 'nationalist cosmopolitanism'. While corporate cosmopolitanism transcends anchors of place and locality, nationalist cosmopolitanism is firmly rooted in local structures of meaning, as made apparent by the fact that Chinese knowledge workers, many of whom have studied and worked overseas, consider it necessary to return home in order to truly realize their cosmopolitan identity. Under this second definition, being cosmopolitan is construed not as an anti-localism, but rather as an expression of local vectors of value.

Such tensions do not pose a threat to currents of globalization. Instead, the 'global' subject, an integral part of a transnational economic system of outsourcing business processes and IT services, is produced through the alignment of these different articulations of cosmopolitanism. Anthropologists have long pointed out that capitalist entities seek to create specific categories of workers, through the appropriation of gender, race, or ethnicity, as a means of exerting control and extracting value from their workforce (Freeman 1993; Ong 1988; Tsing 2009). For example, the feminization of industrial workforces, as seen in East Asia and the maquiladoras of Latin America, was predicated on ideas that women were 'naturally' better at the dextrous work required in the manufacture of garments and light electronics (Mills 2003). Anthropologists have also observed that capital accumulation is dependent on individual ethical projects of personhood, which can relate to religious piety (Osella & Osella 2009; Rudnyckyj 2009), kinship and family (Xiang 2007; Yanagisako 2002), and national and ethnic affiliation (Amrute 2016; Chong 2018; Ong 1997). In their manifesto for 'Gens capitalism', a group of feminist anthropologists have gone further to suggest that individual 'life projects' are constitutive of capitalism. Writing against dominant approaches which place 'the economy' at the centre of analyses, they argue that capitalism is not the product of a set of determining 'economic logics' or 'economic forces' but rather must be understood as a set of inherently fragile and contingent networks that 'are generated from heterogeneity and difference, and from our varied pursuits of being and becoming particular kinds of people, families, or communities' (Bear, Ho, Tsing & Yanagisako 2015). This article draws together these approaches, showing how, through the pursuit of cosmopolitanism, corporate and individual projects of person-making can coincide in capitalist forms.

The nature of services outsourcing renders the production of self and cultural identity especially salient. Although the work is highly routinized, labour-intensive, and de-skilled, leading various scholars to describe service centres as 'factories' of knowledge production (Ross 2006; Upadhya 2009), offshore services can be distinguished from globalized manufacturing in one crucial respect: 'labour migrates without the worker's body' (Aneesh 2006: 68). 'Clients' and 'service providers' are brought together in a virtual timespace, a 'space of flows' (Castells 1996), and yet questions of culture and national belonging are, if anything, even more salient in a context where knowledge workers in the Global South are accused of 'stealing our jobs' by the very people they are hired to serve. Offshore workers are trained to adopt 'neutral accents' (Aneesh 2015), learn American cultural references (Bear 2003), and imbibe Western nationalism (Rodkey 2016). However, corporate processes of enculturation do not necessarily seek to expunge all vestiges of local culture. Rather, as Smitha Radhakrishnan has argued, knowledge workers in the Global South are trained to perform 'appropriate difference', whereby local culture is homogenized and essentialized into a generic set of values deemed 'palatable to Western cosmopolitan culture'. Terming such processes 'cultural streamlining', Radhakrishnan shows how the idealized IT professional in Bangalore is at once 'global' and 'Indian' (2011: 5). The production of such categories, and thus the invocation of cultural difference, is not incidental but rather part of a 'strategy of control' devised by corporations to make workers compliant (Upadhya 2008). Yet, as Radhakrishnan points out, we should not assume that top-down processes are solely responsible for creating 'global' workplaces. Indian IT professionals also contribute through the production of 'symbolic hierarchies about other workers of other backgrounds who are not considered "global"' (Radhakrishnan 2011: 60).

My focus on cosmopolitanism builds on these earlier accounts of culture and corporate personhood in offshore and transnational settings. In this article, I show how Chinese knowledge workers are trained to become reflexive subjects who are able to reconcile Chinese traditions with Western corporate values and perform a curated 'Chineseness', an *appropriate difference*. The aim of such corporate initiatives is to produce a sensibility of corporate cosmopolitanism. Chinese knowledge workers are also implicated in the production of global subjects through class practices of consumption that are part of nationalist cosmopolitanism. As we will see, Chinese middle-class professionals seek to distance themselves from the manufacturing proletariat, and by extension allusions to an old, industrial China, via consumption practices that delineate a global, high-tech identity which, through its particular ethical code, indexes their value and loyalty to the nation.

As explored through analytical terms including 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' and 'rooted cosmopolitanism' (Bhabha 1996; Werbner 2008), anthropologists have shown that 'cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not necessarily antithetical attitudes', as Jonathan Parry (2008: 340) has put it, but rather cosmopolitanism can be seen as a realization or performance of national sentiments and local ethics. Although there have been sustained efforts to explore the production of cosmopolitanism in relation to globalization and diaspora (Beck 2002; Cheah & Robbins 1998; Hall & Werbner 2008; Marsden 2008; Ong 1999; 2006), there is a conspicuous paucity of anthropological research on cosmopolitanism in the workplace (with the exception of Howard 2012; Upadhya 2016) and the role that cosmopolitanism might play in the global economy. This is all the more surprising given the heavy rhetoric on

producing and leveraging 'the global' in ethnographic accounts of contemporary global capitalism (Ho 2005; Mazzerella 2003). By examining the contemporaneous production of corporate cosmopolitanism and nationalist cosmopolitanism, this article demonstrates that within contemporary capitalism the pursuit of 'the global' is not only about making claims of scale. An analysis focused on personhood and the production of self shows that the 'global' also constitutes an ethics through which different scales – the individual, the corporation, and the nation – can be linked together.

The article draws on three months of embedded fieldwork which took place from March to June 2008 inside an offshore centre located in DLSP, supplemented by interviews in the following year. In addition, I interviewed workers and managers employed in other offshore centres, almost all set up by Fortune 500 companies. Two types of services outsourcing are especially prevalent: offshore outsourcing, which is the practice of hiring another organization to perform certain business functions; and captive offshoring, whereby a company opens its own offshore subsidiary. Unusually, the offshore centre in which I carried out fieldwork has connections to both types. It is a 'shared service centre' (SSC) – one of a network of SSCs designated to carry out the 'back-office' work of the same organization (typically HR, finance, recruitment, and legal processes) – and hence a classic example of captive offshoring. However, it was set up by a global management consultancy that I shall pseudonymously call Systeo, which is also one of the major providers of outsourcing services (i.e. offshore outsourcing). In addition to this 'back-office' it ran centres for business process outsourcing (BPO) and IT outsourcing (ITO) in DLSP. Indeed, given the primacy of outsourcing for its business, Systeo can be considered a central organization in the global economy for services outsourcing. It is also a self-consciously global company. Although originating in the United States, Systeo markets itself as an entity that not only crosses national boundaries, but also *transcends* them. Systeo prides itself on having a global delivery model, on having a global leadership that pursues a global vision, and, notably, on having global employees to realize this vision.

Software outsourcing and the Chinese knowledge economy

Since the early 2000s, the Chinese government has increasingly emphasized the importance of service-based industries and the knowledge economy, as indicated in the plan to transition 'From Made in China to China Services'. This shift recognizes that China's strength in manufacturing has come at an extremely high cost, not least in terms of environmental destruction and the ensuing negative impacts on human life. It also reflects the desire to focus on technological innovation as the source of economic growth, and thus place information and knowledge at the centre of economic processes (Barry & Slater 2002: 189), with the hope that China will come to be seen as a developed and modern economy on a par with Europe and North America. Accordingly, the Chinese state has dramatically increased expenditure on research and development in science and technology, with the hope to promote 'independent innovation' (Wilsdon & Keeley 2007), and has introduced policies which have explicitly sought to incentivize foreign investment into services – in particular, technology-based industries. One such example is the Ministry of Commerce 1000-100-10 project initiated in 2006 to develop the software outsourcing industry. Specifically, it 'sought to establish 1000 internationally accredited outsourcing providers nationwide, to attract 100 leading multinational firms to transfer a substantial proportion of their outsourcing

services needs to China, and to build 10 globally competitive outsourcing bases in China' (Zheng, Willcocks & Yang 2010: 19).

Located in Northeastern China with a population of approximately 6 million people, Dalian is one such outsourcing base. Formerly a fishing village which became a centre for heavy industry, Dalian has in recent years become reincarnated as the IT-enabled outsourcing centre of China, thanks to economic incentives designed to attract ITO and BPO. It has three software parks, of which DLSP is the oldest. Dalian dominates the market for offshored Japanese call-centre work, enabled by the limited number of Japanese-speaking Chinese, a legacy of Japanese colonization for forty years. The close proximity to South Korea, coupled with the presence of a significant number of ethnic Koreans (one of China's ethnic minorities), means that it is also the leading destination for outsourced work from South Korea.

Cultural difference and reflexivity

Service centre employees often complained about their jobs, in particular their process-orientated nature. One described their work as *laodong miji xing*, extremely labour-intensive, a term usually reserved for physical labour, and some even wore polythene sleeve protectors typically worn by factory workers, such is the volume of sorting work that they undertake. And yet, as part of their promotion trajectory, employees must take soft-skill training. Originally designed for the management consultants they served, such training was not, in the main, concerned with improving their capability to do their jobs. Instead it was directed to the production of certain kinds of subjectivity deemed desirable in 'global' companies.

In my first week at Systeo, in March 2008, I attended a session called 'Coaching in the Workplace' that was being run by an Australian, Graham Richards,[1] a former management consultant-turned-corporate trainer. First, he played short films of coaching scenarios which focused on examples of conflict in relationships between team leads and workers. Produced by 'Global', Systeo's US headquarters, half of the actors in the films were actually Systeo employees, according to Graham. A range of ethnicities were represented, reminding the Chinese participants that they work not for a local company but a 'global' one. Then followed an interactive activity, which began with Graham asking the participants, 'In the Chinese culture how would you define self-awareness?' Met with silence, he proceeded to read out a definition from the *Oxford English dictionary*, and then added 'self-awareness is the ability to get a clear perception, to not be coloured or affected by other people'. Graham then asked all the participants to walk around the room. The first time they should avoid all eye contact with other participants, the second time they must make eye contact, and the third time he asked them to make eye contact and physical contact, one 'business' gesture and one 'non-business' gesture. The Chinese employees snaked around the tables, most seem quite inhibited, some appeared a bit embarrassed. Graham said that he finds them very polite, a bit reserved. 'In other cultures, say, in Australia, people are more open … there are big high fives', he said, raising his hand to demonstrate. As the training progressed, Graham continued to invoke a notion of 'Chinese culture', which was almost always framed in terms of difference – to Australian, American, or Western culture. By tying such narrations to the development of self-awareness, he encouraged participants to nurture their cultural reflexivity. At the same time, he helped to produce standardized narratives about Chinese culture and cultural difference (see also Upadhya 2016).

In this context, difference is not a neutral condition. Rather, the focus on diversity serves to highlight a perceived lack or deficiency on the part of employees. It is through the identification of a lack that employees can be persuaded to transform their mentality in line with corporate demands (Upadhya 2008: 116). What kind of transformation is desirable became clear in another training, 'Presentation Skills'. On this occasion, the trainer was Chinese, Fred Li, a Systeo employee in the human resources department. Like Graham, he used training material produced by 'Global'. First, the participants were filmed giving a one-minute presentation on who they were and what they hoped to get out of the training. Straight after, the films were played back to the employees. They were invited to give a self-appraisal, followed by feedback from the rest of the group. For the rest of the day, Fred guided the employees through the key characteristics of 'persuasive presentations', and how to manage challenges like nervousness and audience interruptions. 'Remember the 4Ds!', he exclaimed – 'Detour, Delay, Diffuse and Dismiss'. Just before they left, the participants were told they must prepare a second presentation on a topic of their choice, to be delivered the following day. These were also filmed and played back to the employees, who then had to compare it to their original, 'benchmark presentation'.

Yet it was more than their presentation skills that were being benchmarked and evaluated. By watching their performances on camera, and subjecting them to repeated critique, employees learn to objectify the self – it is something that can be captured and worked on. As Carol Upadhya (2016) has argued, soft-skill training not only produces specific social skills but also seeks to 'reprogram the self'. With material directly imported from the United States, the training is designed to create American corporate subjects, 'who reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a business, tending to one's own qualities and traits as owned and even improvable assets' (Gershon 2011: 542). This point is exemplified in one employee's presentation, which he described as 'How YouTube can improve your Business English'. In fact, he talked about how workers who frequently interact with Indian colleagues could better understand and learn the Indian accent and mannerisms by looking at YouTube videos. To make his case, he delivered parts of his presentation in an Indian accent and mimicked the head wobble that often features in stereotypes of Indians. Employees learn to reflect upon their comportment, accent, and diction, which are constructed not as the outcome of long-term socialization and thus deeply ingrained, but rather as something that can be changed at will, and *optimized*. This is vital for employees to perform 'appropriate difference'. In a context where culture and cultural difference is highlighted, the imperative for practising reflexivity encourages employees to reflect upon their habits and preconceptions, and how these might differ across cultures. Soft-skill training, through the inculcation of a particular conception of self, helps to build up employees' 'capacity to interact across cultural lines' (Hiebert 2002: 212) and develop the 'cultural openness' characteristic of cosmopolitanism.

The pursuit of the global

I was introduced to Systeo by Brian McAlister, a British teacher who gave weekly English classes at the SSC. To obtain access he suggested I run an 'English Corner' – conversation sessions that would supplement his own more formal instruction – an idea favourable to management, not least because workers spent most of their time communicating with clients based in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (as well as continental Europe). Every month the SSC would run a 'Non-Chinese Week' when

workers would be banned from speaking Mandarin, instead being permitted only to speak English, even to Chinese colleagues. Workers were supposed to be fined one yuan whenever they were heard uttering Mandarin, a system which encouraged mutual surveillance. However, the initiative eventually collapsed as workers found it awkward and cumbersome to speak a foreign language to each other. Such attempts to force workers to speak the languages of their clients not only reflected the subordination of offshore labour, but could also be read as part of a larger apparatus of enculturation.

At the time of fieldwork, almost all employees of the SSC were Chinese nationals, with the exception of Christina Teoh. Based in Malaysia, Christina spent little time in Dalian, visiting just once a month to oversee the running of the centre. She told me that she was chosen by the global leadership team to set up the SSC, over a much cheaper local, because she was considered to be 'very Systeo'. The importance of having 'Systeofied' people, to use the phrase of one manager, was made explicit in a corporate video targeted at new employees, in which they are told: 'We are our values, we are Systeo'. However, instilling the company's core values into the SSC's Chinese workforce proved to be much more difficult than Christina had imagined. 'They just didn't get it', she said. Indeed, workers told her that the core values were not a part of Chinese culture; they were Western values. She disagreed and told them that they were values that could be understood in *all cultures*, they were 'global values' – a point repeated by various senior executives during fieldwork.

Although professional services firms like Systeo often profess to having a 'distinctive culture' or unique 'way of doing business', their core values tend to be remarkably similar. Neoliberal tenets of innovation and individual empowerment are extolled, indexing a particular corporate mentality which has become idealized under financial capitalism. Managerial control is now exerted through the imposition of normative forms, hence the pursuit of a 'strong corporate culture' when all employees share, and thus adhere to, the organization's core values (Deal & Kennedy 1982). It is an example of how the culture concept has become politicized (Wright 1998) by corporate experts who have invoked an outdated, static model of culture, a functionalist whole devoid of outside influences, in order to promote totalizing social control. Indeed, one of the central contradictions of corporate culture is that it is limited by its own definition of culture. That is to say, because corporate culture poses a totalizing vision of enculturation – it sees culture as a straitjacket of norms and values – it presents itself as a horizon of incommensurability. How, then, can a concept predicated on incommensurability be made commensurable with local cultural forms? How can a concept of cultural exclusivity be rendered inclusive?

Before employees could be encouraged to perform Systeo's core values, they first needed to be persuaded that such a thing was possible. At the time, Christina was taking intensive Mandarin lessons from a private tutor, paid for by Systeo.[2] She asked her tutor to translate the core values into Chinese and find examples from Chinese history which illustrated their applicability to Chinese culture. At first he thought this would be an easy task. But it took him three days of continuous searching. When she showed his examples to the workers, they said that they could find better ones, so she decided to hold a competition amongst Systeo's Chinese employees 'to find the best example of the core values in Chinese culture'. In his study of spiritual reform at an Indonesian steel plant, Daromir Rudnyckyj shows how local culture is not seen as an obstacle to be overcome in contemporary global capitalism, but rather corporate managers 'seek to combine localized cultural norms with outside values to become more globally competitive'

(2009: 117). Hence, Islamic worship is not considered antithetical to the production of market value, but rather can be a means of improving efficiency. Similarly, Chinese culture, when harnessed in the appropriate manner, is seen as a means of nurturing the desired corporate subjectivity.

The winner of the competition, Diana Zhu, had her essay published in the company magazine. Diana's illustrated essay relays the story of 'San gu mao lu', ('Three visits to the thatched cottage'), which comes from the classic Chinese novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Set in the late Han dynasty, it tells of how the warlord Liu Bei searches out a talented military strategist by the name of Zhu Ge Liang to strengthen his army at a time when China was divided into competing states each governed by a separate warlord. He went to the cottage of Zhu Ge Liang, not once but three times; on each occasion, he failed to meet this legendary military talent. But when he finally did catch him, his persistence was rewarded: Zhu Ge Liang joined Liu Bei and became a loyal and long-standing servant. For Diana, two of Systeo's core values are exemplified by this story. In the first part of her essay, she argues that this story exemplifies Systeo's core value of 'excellent people':

> Due to Liu Bei's far-sighted attitude to talents; he managed to set up the Shu kingdom in the later period. Similarly, talents are the most important assets for Systeo. Only by attracting and developing the best talent for our business, stretching our people and developing a 'can do' attitude, can Systeo win an undefeatable position in the future competition.

In the second part of the essay, Diana argues that the quest for talent refers not only to people of competency but also to people with ethical principles, and thus also exemplifies Systeo's core value of integrity.

> In order to repay Liu Bei's analysis, Liang responded to Bei's appeal and threw himself heart and soul into Bei's service … After the south was subdued, he didn't stop, but turned to conquer the northern heartland and do his best to remove the traitors in order to realize Bei's dream. He was willing to take responsibility, acted ethically, and encouraged honest and opened debate.

By pointing out the importance of choosing the right personnel for Systeo and Liu Bei's army, Diana's essay draws an equivalence between two very different contexts. Systeo's core values are found not only in different places, but also at different times, suggesting, then, that the core values index not a modern subjectivity but rather a trans-historical cosmopolitan orientation. The incitement to 'be global' is not simply a geographical universality; it is also a temporal one. The drawing of equivalence is also achieved through the visual presentation of the essay. Each section of prose is presented in Chinese and English, the paragraphs alternate between the two languages, so emphasizing that Systeo's core values can be translated into Chinese and by extension Chinese culture: that is, they are not the sole preserve of an American or Western ethos. Yet, the competition did more than perform the universality of the core values. As exemplified by the titling of the winning essay as 'Systeo's core values and Chinese traditional culture', the discourse of the competition intimates that Systeo culture is indeed a form of culture. The repeated parallels between Systeo's core values and Chinese values, Systeo culture and Chinese culture, helps to establish the facticity of core values as the foundation of an organization's culture. And hence Chinese employees are taught that there is a legitimate basis – cultural commensurability – upon which Systeo's core values can be imposed in China.

Further, such comparisons project the static and closed definition of culture for which corporate culture has been criticized onto conceptualizations of Chinese culture,

which is reduced to, and reified as, the traditional values associated with Confucianism and other canons of classical thought. Such a conceptualization ignores the continuous reformulation of Chinese culture, which has been shaped through contact with outside influences, including the West, and also the changing evaluation of Confucian thought, which was condemned as feudal and forcibly expunged during the high socialist period. That is to say, the discursive work of producing the global is achieved through the construction of equivalences between two entities which are not actually similar in kind. Indeed, it is the very work of commensuration that enacts the erasure of differences. As a consequence, we find a rather particular representation of the global being produced. The global is depicted as lying within the local and not as an entity which encompasses the local. Consequently, the suggestion that Chinese workers are being colonized by external values is avoided, which is particularly important given the continued sensitivity in China to foreign inference following its 'century of humiliation' at the hands of Western powers. In short, the subsumption of the global within the local, through practices of commensuration, helps to legitimize the standardization of corporate norms and behaviours. In this way, we find the very 'strategic adaptation' that Radhakrishnan argues is central to the production of appropriate difference. In Bangalore, the drive to make Indian IT workers develop a 'global' mindset is not necessarily a process of Westernization but rather aims to create 'a difference that improves upon "being Indian" without violating it' (Radhakrishnan 2011: 58). Similarly, we find that Systeo's techniques of inculcating corporate culture avoid opposing Chinese and Western values. Instead, the pursuit of the global is achieved by fashioning a palatable, generic form of Chineseness which is commensurate with dominant Western corporate values.

National cosmopolitans

Although 'Non-Chinese Week' did not succeed in promoting the use of foreign languages among Chinese employees, there was no shortage of people who wanted to converse in English with me and other native speakers. As the lingua franca of Systeo, English was seen as a critical and valued aspect of working in a global company. When the director of the centre decided to change the operating language of the employee database from English into Chinese in order to improve clarity of communication, senior managers Sophie Ma and Clare Mao – both Chinese nationals – went to her office to object. They rationalized that as a global company Systeo should *only* use English in formal communications. Written Chinese was not the only aspect of the local that Chinese employees hoped to expunge. Most employees made conscious efforts to speak with American or British accents and had adopted English names (Duthie 2007). They had not been coerced or encouraged to do so; indeed a few employees had kept their Chinese names. Rather they saw such a profound change as one of the advantages of working at the service centre.

Many of the employees told me they had chosen to work at Systeo because it was not a domestic company (*guoqi*). They explained that they were not cut out for the organizational politics and strong hierarchies identified with *guoqi* work, describing themselves as 'too innocent' or 'naïve'. As well as being perceived to be more meritocratic, global companies like Systeo offered a host of other benefits which could not be found in Chinese state-owned enterprises and other local workplaces. Take Celebrating Performance. Nominally an incentive scheme to reward employee performance, it was also an example of how Systeo enabled workers to engage in

conspicuous consumption. Described by one Dalianese manager as 'online shopping', Celebrating Performance took the form of an intranet website where employees were invited to redeem points, which are awarded for exceptional performance. Tilly Cheng showed me her brand new iPod, which she had 'bought' off the website. Other workers exchanged their points for digital cameras or electric toothbrushes. Coming from a central Systeo warehouse, these goods were often not designed for the Chinese market; Tilly's Sony Ericsson mobile phone did not have a Chinese language setting. She was not bothered by the inconvenience of being unable to receive or send text messages in Chinese, saying, 'I'm still going to use it. Anyone who wants to contact me will just have to write in English!' I asked her if that would be a problem, to which she responded with a big smile, 'No, most of my friends speak good English'. They would certainly need a very high level of language proficiency, which could only be acquired through substantial sojourns abroad in an English-speaking country. The absence of a Chinese language setting was not perceived as a shortcoming, but was actually a valued feature of this phone, for it marked Tilly out as a member of China's middle class.

Celebrating Performance exemplified how Systeo's management practices engaged workers with a global imaginary. It facilitated consumption characterized by its supra-local character, consumption that, in turn, highlighted the cosmopolitan identities of the workers. Yet, we should not necessarily see workers' engagement with Celebrating Performance as evidence of corporate cosmopolitanism. Lisa Rofel has identified cosmopolitanism as a key trope in the cultural imaginary of contemporary China, one that 'consists in two aspects in tension with one another: a self-conscious transcendence of locality, posited as a universal transcendence, accomplished through a consumer identity and a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China's place in the world' (2007: 111). Particularly important are narratives that elevate China's present-day cosmopolitanism. Adopting a postmodern perspective, Rofel argues that middle-class Chinese recount stories which, through a series of binaries, align scarcity, collective values, and insularity with socialism, and consumption, individuality, and global connection with the post-Mao era. In this way, China's socialist past is formulated as a locality from which one can leave in the search for a global identity; when Rofel speaks of transcending the local, she refers not to a specific place but rather to a revised memory of life under socialism which serves to exaggerate China's provincialism and backwardness during that era. In short, cosmopolitanism in contemporary China is distinctly connected to the pursuit of a post-Mao modernity, a project that entails a conscious turning away from high socialism and its project of modernity, and a reconceptualization of China's development, which is now evaluated by way of comparison with the advanced nations of Europe and North America.

Rofel highlights the technologies of the self through which Chinese people can reimagine, and embody, China as a modern nation that is competitive with the West. These technologies are especially visible among heterosexual Chinese women, who, Rofel claims, 'are normalized as the mediators of cosmopolitan desire' since they 'embody the tension between transcendent desire and protective Chineseness' (2007: 112). Of the 200 workers in the service centre, around 90 per cent were women, many of whom were keen to talk about their consumption practices and how they related to the curation of identity. In one of the conversation classes I taught, Sally Fu initiated the subject of buying expensive or *mingpai* (branded) goods as opposed to cheaper alternatives. She justified the purchase of her expensive mobile phone, saying, 'It is a symbol. It shows I am an office girl, I do not work in a factory'. Jane Yu added that

although people sometimes spend more than 3,000 yuan on a phone, it is possible to buy one for as little as 200 yuan. Another worker, Emma Cai, disagreed with Sally. She said that she paid a lot for branded items because they are of better quality, giving an example of the Miu Miu bag she owned, which had lasted three years.

Although workers give different explanations for their consumption behaviour, a common line of reasoning can be discerned, one which draws parallels between qualities of goods and qualities of people. By purchasing branded items of high quality, they implicitly reference a modern subject on a par with those of the developed nations of South Korea and France – the countries from where these goods originate – and distance themselves from locally produced goods, which are generally seen as being cheap and low quality. In doing so, they make status distinctions: they distinguish themselves from blue-collar workers, who also carry out routinized, de-skilled work but who labour in industrial settings. Cosmopolitanism has long been associated with elites or the middle class; however, it is usually suggested that cosmopolitanism is a disposition or stance which cannot be bought or reduced to economic value. By contrast, in this setting, we find that cosmopolitanism is a quality that is performed through acts of conspicuous consumption.

After the class, Jane took me to her desk to show me photos of her and her family. Many of these had been taken in a professional studio. One that sticks in my mind was a black-and-white shot of her when she was pregnant. She is lying down, naked with her hands placed strategically over her breasts, her legs crossed, and baby bump luminescent. Then she went through her wedding photos. She and her husband can be seen in various 'romantic' poses, with her wearing a puffy white gown and not the red qipao dress usually worn by Chinese brides. In case I was to assume that she sought to become Westernized, Jane then showed me photos of the two of them in Chinese *gudai* (traditional period costume) clothes. 'I know these aren't very *liuxing* (popular) in the UK but in China they are, why don't you get some done?' she suggested to me, reminding me that she had lived in London for three years. The embrace of such traditional attire chimes with recent research that has highlighted the revival of Chinese traditions, classical Chinese thought, and philosophies that were suppressed under Mao, and which are now are considered compatible with both individual and national projects of post-Mao modernity (Matthews 2017). Especially when combined with referents of Western knowledge, symbols of Chinese traditions are seen as indicative of a modern, cosmopolitan self who is at ease with managing different sources of cultural capital.

Finally, Jane showed me photos of her 2-year-old son. Some of these were candid pictures, while others were *yishu* (artistic) ones which were taken in a professional studio. The latter had cost a thousand yuan, almost a third of her monthly salary. Posing with a baby grand piano, wearing a grey wig and white tights, in one photo he resembled a miniature Mozart, and in another he was dressed as a Native American. Such photos demonstrated a knowledge of different places and historical figures, albeit in caricatured form. In a third photo, her son brandished a machine gun and was wearing a military-style uniform complete with side-tilted beret. As has been well documented, China has the largest army in the world – it is a military power which now has the resources to dominate the 'civilized' Western nation-states. This collection of photos, which once again contrast Western with Chinese imagery, highlight in particular how workers' performances of cosmopolitanism incorporate references to China's rising stature on the global stage. Cosmopolitanism in China is not posited, or enacted, in opposition

to nationalism. Such practices of conspicuous consumption could also be read as expressions of patriotism.

A few months into fieldwork, photos began to circulate around the office showing protests outside the Dalian stores of the French supermarket giant Carrefour. China was soon to host the Olympic Games and the torch relay had commenced only to be disrupted by human rights activists who had managed to extinguish the torch in Paris, hoping to highlight the political unrest in Tibet and China's shaky human rights record. Chinese people, including SSC workers, had taken to the streets to demonstrate their loyalty to China. One younger worker, Xiao Mei, told me she and her parents had boycotted Carrefour. In the same conversation, Judy Li added that Chinese people were boycotting all French businesses, not just Carrefour. These included 'LV [Louis Vuitton], Polo [Ralph Lauren],[3] and CD [Christian Dior]', to which Xiao Mei let out a gasp before saying, 'CD is French?!' It transpired that she had recently bought a pair of Christian Dior sunglasses for 1,700 yuan, almost a month's wages. I asked whether she would still wear them now that she knew that CD was a French brand. 'All my life, how do you say that in English?' she replied. Although middle-class Chinese may temporarily boycott certain foreign brands, this action is short-lived, not least because such consumption is not seen as incompatible with the making of a loyal, nationalist subject. In the long term, the performance of a modern, cosmopolitan identity, achieved through technologies of the self such as conspicuous consumption, is seen as critical to contributing to the nation's strength and external perception.

At the same time, we find that overt displays of national loyalty can be directed by objectives other than patriotism. I often communicated with workers via the online messaging tool MSN Messenger.[4] When I logged on to the service on 8 April 2008, just one day after the Carrefour protests had begun, I noticed that many of the workers had prefixed their names with 'I Love China' – 'love' being represented by a red heart. The number of workers adding this prefix grew each day. What I found particularly intriguing was the medium through which workers chose to show their patriotism. MSN Messenger was one of the primary means by which workers communicated with their foreign colleagues: that is, their clients (in part because it was free to use). Notably, they rarely used MSN Messenger to communicate with friends and family, preferring instead the Chinese messaging software QQ. It was apparent that the nationalist prefix was only to be seen in the work sphere. Many had complained about how their clients treated them, like 'the slaves of foreign offices', as one put it. Jane Li, the worker who had shown me the photos of her son, spoke of the discomfort she felt when her clients acted above Chinese people. In addition, she did not understand why 'many people outside of China think of Chinese people as poor and not modern'. By augmenting their online names with the prefix 'I Love China', SSC workers showed their clients that they were not ashamed of being Chinese, nor were they ashamed of China (cf. Fong 2011). In this way, they challenged racial hierarchies which legitimize the devaluation of workers' labour in the Global South, who were naturalized as the service providers of the global, without having to openly confront their clients. For these SSC workers, China was a place of modernity, whose power and development could only be aided by their own contributions.

Acts of conspicuous consumption like those I have described can also be read as a critique of racialized work hierarchies. In her study of Indian IT workers in Germany, Sareeta Amrute observes that these precariously employed professionals actively engage in leisure activities as part of a 'politics of pleasure in the everyday' (2016: 24) – what she

terms *eros*, drawing on the work of Bifo Berardi (2009) and Herbert Marcuse (1955). It is through the pursuit of pleasure, whether through consumption or relaxation (often the two are combined), that these workers 'produce a middle-class imaginary that is made to stand in for national character'. Amrute goes on to argue that 'the famous consumerism of the new Indian middle class, then, needs to be understood not only in opposition to Nehruvian austerity but also in conjunction with the global politics of establishing a class identity that converts the politics of racialized labor into those of national identity' (2016: 197). In other words, class practices of consumption performed by Chinese knowledge workers that are nominally directed to the performance of nationalism could be understood as a means of challenging inequalities produced in a racialized system of value production, and thus as a way of transposing differences of race into differences of class.

Global returnees

Offshore services have often been described as simply another iteration of the 'race to the bottom' which has come to define labour sourcing under globalization. Within such analyses, it is commonly assumed that workers who take up such jobs either are from low-income, low-education groups or see such employment as one of the few possibilities for experiencing 'the global'. In the context discussed here, we find that neither assumption holds. Workers in DLSP belonged to an elite, urban class defined by home ownership, employment in private, often foreign, companies, and high levels of education. Despite only earning a few thousand yuan a month, many Systeo employees lived in apartments which cost over one million yuan to buy. Typically, their purchase was supplemented by deposits from their parents, either their own or their spouses' parents.[5] Some parents had even bought properties for their children in cash, highlighting the privileged socioeconomic status of these employees, who enjoyed a level of security not often experienced by offshore service workers. Education was another means of demonstrating and leveraging their privilege. Employees possessed at minimum a Batchelor's degree from a Chinese university. Many had been expensively educated in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, or Australia, usually for a postgraduate degree. Some had also worked abroad and acquired permanent residency status, like Tilly Zhao and Gavin Yang, who had become permanent residents in Canada and Australia, respectively. However, both of them had let their residencies expire.

In contrast to prior waves of emigration, which led to the formation of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe, these middle-class urban Chinese would not stay abroad to send remittances and instead stressed that they always intended on coming back to China, an intention which seemed at odds with their pursuit of cosmopolitanism and modernity, especially given the de-skilled nature of the work in the service centre. Further, they would not find their earning power much improved on their return. As one manager, Li Mei, put it, 'It's not worth sending your kid abroad. If they don't have work experience, they won't leapfrog people who've only been (educated) in China'. Although overseas degrees would make potential employees more attractive to *waiqi* (foreign companies) like Systeo, where the pay is usually higher than in domestic companies, Mei explained that the differential was insignificant compared to the amount invested in overseas education. 'Some analysts have been to the UK for two years, two hundred thousand yuan it costs, and then they get three or four thousand a month starting out in the SSC – you do the math!' she exclaimed.[6] If not

a financial investment, then why do Chinese parents send their children abroad to be educated? Mei explained by way of her own experience. Her job at Systeo was her first since returning to China and she said that her salary was not comparable to what she received in Canada. She told me 'the reason why I can accept the (pay) gap is because I want to be near to my family, as long as I can cope to have a good life it's ok'. This was a sentiment expressed by many of the workers, who would make bald statements such as: 'There is only one option: to return to China, because our parents are here'. That is to say, workers claimed that their decision to return to China, to take up jobs that were clearly far below their competency and education level, was motivated by filial piety.

A central tenet of Confucian thought, filial piety has undergone substantial revision in contemporary understandings of moral obligation in Chinese society. As Yan Yunxiang has observed, young people in both rural and urban contexts see 'individualism as central to their moral obligations' (2011: 37), not the family or any other collective grouping. In particular, he finds the proliferation of narratives which connect the individual pursuit of happiness with the fulfilment of filial piety a quite staggering inversion of the traditional definition of filial piety, in which children are expected to make individual sacrifices for the sake of their parents' happiness and well-being. Yan argues that we are witnessing the individualization of Chinese society, marked by the rise of a new ethics discourse that favours the individual over the family, and consequently we are observing the legitimization of individual desires for intimacy, privacy, freedom, and material comforts. Taking Yan's point seriously, I question whether Chinese workers were in fact motivated by family duties and suggest that filial piety is used flexibly to denote the realization of their individual desires: in particular, their desire to realize a cosmopolitan self, an objective which can only be fully realized by *returning* to China.

If we understand that cosmopolitanism in this context refers not to a fixed set of attributes but rather to a relative shift – a perceived advancement of the self – we can see that such a transformation can only be recognized by coming home. If these workers had stayed in the United Kingdom, or the United States, they would not have realized this reinvention, which is claimed vis-à-vis Chinese who have not experienced living abroad and who have not had a foreign education. Moreover, the pursuit of cosmopolitanism only has significance within the broader context of China's modernization. Although workers were not employed by state-owned enterprises or the government, they still conceived of themselves as 'patriotic professionals' (Hoffman 2010). The investment they had made in themselves by going abroad would, in itself, have benefits for China. As one worker put it, 'If I can make myself better, I can better my country'. It is by drawing equivalences between individual transformation and national modernization that workers can justify their decision to return to China and take up menial, routinized, de-skilled jobs for which they are immensely overqualified. In this respect, their sentiments echo those of transnational Chinese students, who are the focus of another Dalian-based study, carried out by Vanessa Fong. She argues that these students, despite feeling an ambivalence towards their motherland, see themselves as the motor of China's modernization. By seeking out opportunities abroad to study and work, not only do they hope to bring back social, cultural, and economic capital that will fortify themselves and recast them as cosmopolitan citizens (Fong 2011: 52-3); they also believe that by improving their own capabilities they will be helping to transform China into 'paradise' – a place of modernity and wealth.

It is notable that none of the employees I interviewed aspired to get out of the back-office: that is, become a management consultant based in Beijing or Shanghai. This had only happened once, employees told me, an exceptional situation where the SSC worker had become extremely close to the consultant team she served. 'Only if you're not married might you consider it', said one employee. 'There's more dating opportunities in the big cities', she reasoned. Career progression was to be achieved, instead, through promotion within the SSC or by moving to a rival service centre in DLSP. These highly educated workers accepted their futures in de-skilled work, in part, because they saw the means to development, of the self and the nation, as lying with their children. As well as spending considerable sums on private education and a host of extra-curricular activities, workers used the knowledge and experiences they had built up through their own education, travels, and employment to nurture their children. One employee who had majored in Japanese and worked with Japanese clients spoke Japanese to his son at home – a quite staggering admission given the antipathy displayed to Japan and Japanese people in China.[7] As well as proficiency in foreign languages, employees wanted their children to develop cultural fluency. As one put it, 'I want my daughter to be Chinese with Chinese people and American with American people'. SSC workers did not only desire to become cosmopolitans, they wanted their children to become cosmopolitans too.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the production of 'global' subjects in China's offshore services economy. In contrast to scholarly accounts which have invoked the term 'global' as an analytic, denoting the transcendence or demise of national borders and national forms (Appadurai 1996; Giddens 1990), I have taken 'global' to be an emic term, one which I have unpacked through the analytic of cosmopolitanism. First, I have analysed the corporate efforts to produce cosmopolitan employees imbued with 'global' values, showing how the legitimacy of 'the global' is produced not by encompassing the local within the global, but rather by subsuming the global within the local. In this way, employees are encouraged to perform a streamlined 'Chineseness' – a standardized and decontextualized form – and 'the global' is rendered commensurable with local values and histories. Second, I have shown how this endeavour compares with employees' individual projects to realize a cosmopolitan self which is conceived not in line with corporate figurations, but rather as part of a broader national project of elevating China's development to parallel that of developed Western nations. Through consumption practices (including the consumption of work) which demonstrate a cultural openness, Chinese employees reference and perform modernity. In doing so, they both distance themselves from other kinds of factory worker and contribute to the nation's strength and development.

Through my analysis, I show the enduring importance of national and local cultural forms; far from dissipating with globalization, these have strengthened (Ailon-Souday & Kunda 2003). Indeed, it is through the production of corporate persons who are able to reconcile and manage multiple affiliations that global production of services – that is, production that stretches across multiple territories – can be sustained. I demonstrate that the importance of cosmopolitanism for the global economy derives from its capacity, as a cultural imaginary, to link together different scales. The pursuit of cosmopolitanism, in its different forms, creates a productive friction between individual projects of self-making, corporate projects of disciplining labour, as well

as national projects of pursuing modernity and development. As Anna Tsing reminds us, 'Friction is not just about slowing things down. Friction is required to keep global power in motion' (2005: 6). Cosmopolitanism informs the ethical projects through which scalar connections that extend from the individual to the global can be made, and in doing so brings a now dominant capitalist form – offshore services – into being.

Global sourcing of labour, and the negative effects associated with it, cannot be wholly explained by technological developments (cf. Castells 1996; Giddens 1990) or the hegemony of capital (Harvey 1989). Rather, the account presented here reveals the importance of identifying the ethical forms and the attendant tensions which legitimate and enable new kinds of global production systems. We see the kinds of cultural work that imaginaries of 'the global' actually do, and thus shift away from the assumption that they are only signifiers of corporate power and corporate prestige. We have long known that the global is constituted from local actions, meanings, and discourses (Ong & Collier 2005). I would add that the global is also a form of ethics through which competing interests and different visions of the future can be reconciled, to the benefit of capitalist profit-making.

NOTES

[1] All interlocutors have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

[2] Like many Malaysian Chinese, Christina grew up speaking Cantonese and not Mandarin.

[3] Ralph Lauren is actually an American brand.

[4] In fact, since 2005 the service is known as Windows Live Messenger; however, many still use the original name of MSN colloquially.

[5] An apartment has become a requisite for men to be seen as a viable marriage prospect (Fincher 2016).

[6] I found this to be an overestimation of an entry-level position in the SSC: most new employees with no prior work experience started at 2,500-3,000 yuan per month.

[7] Ostensibly, such sentiments can be traced back to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), which is notable for Japan's extreme aggressions against China, including the mass murder and mass rapes of Chinese in the Nanjing Massacre. However, the Chinese state and elites have played a vital role in fomenting and instrumentalizing these sentiments through war commemoration, state propaganda, and foreign policy (Gries 2005; He 2007).

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Le cosmopolitisme dans une économie mondialisée : le cas des usines intellectuelles chinoises

Résumé

Dans le parc informatique de Dalian, le centre chinois de sous-traitance informatique et de délocalisation, les travailleurs de la connaissance traitent des données « à la chaîne » et exécutent des tâches hautement répétitives et mal rémunérées pour lesquelles ils s'avèrent infiniment surqualifiés. Dans le sillage du récent intérêt pour la culture et le statut d'individu dans les études portant sur le capitalisme mondial, l'autrice avance que ces travailleurs sont motivés par deux formes de cosmopolitisme : un cosmopolitisme d'entreprise – la capacité de réconcilier les valeurs supraterritoriales de culture « mondiale » d'entreprise avec les valeurs locales – et un cosmopolitisme nationaliste, dans lequel la performance individuelle de l'ouverture culturelle est perçue comme une contribution au projet national chinois de modernisation. Tout en proposant une rare description du cosmopolitisme au travail, cet article démontre l'importance du cosmopolitisme pour l'économie mondiale. La quête du cosmopolitisme donne lieu à une friction

productive entre projets personnels de construction de soi, projets d'entreprise de discipline de la main-d'œuvre, et projets nationaux de modernisation et de développement.

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