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Miao Lu, **The Transsion Approach: Translating Chinese Mobile Technology in Africa,** Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2025, 224 pp., $28.00 (paperback).

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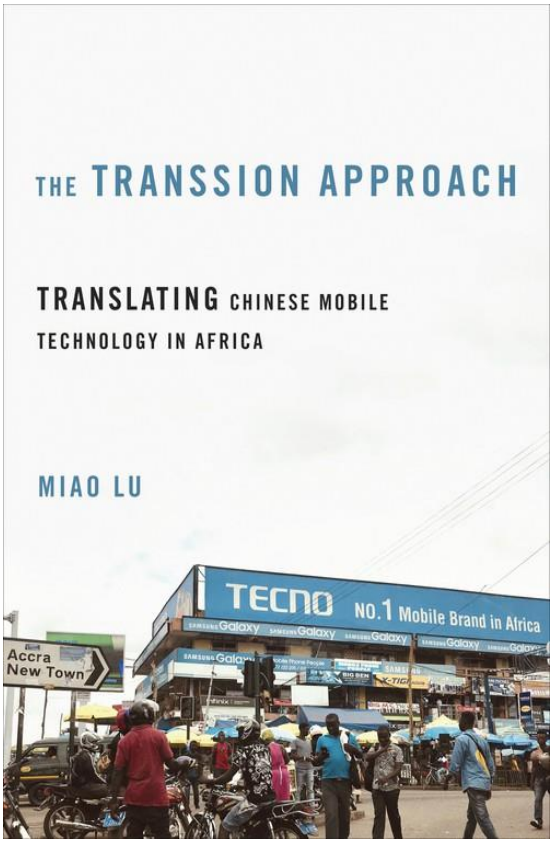

China's deepening engagement in Africa's development in the 21st century has been framed through an increasingly polarized debate. In both public and scholarly arenas, China's portrayal of these efforts as benign developmentalist aspirations of South–South cooperation is continually confronted by warnings that its expansion across the Global South constitutes an emerging neo-colonial project. How, then, should we understand the success of China's industrial forces—technology being one important element among many—in Africa? Amid the thick ideological fog of these polemics, the on-the-ground complexity of South–South encounters—and the flows of technology, knowledge, and innovation embedded within them—demands rigorous empirical accounts and critical analysis.

It is in this context that Miao Lu's timely book, ***The Transsion Approach: Translating Chinese Mobile Technology in Africa,*** provides a detailed account of an impactful actor in Africa's digital transformation—Transsion, a Shenzhen-based company that has become Africa's top mobile phone seller by producing affordable devices tailored to the local market. Through a multisited ethnography conducted across China and Ghana, Lu undertakes an ambitious effort to disentangle the multilayered social life of Transsion's mobile phones as they travel across continents, moving beyond familiar binaries of south and north, developed and developing, modernized and yet to be.

Before turning to the detailed ethnographic account of Transsion phones, Lu situates the book within the historical trajectories of African development and China–Africa engagement, as well as within broader intellectual debates on development and globalizing technologies. Lu charts a genealogy of postwar development approaches across three historical periods: from institutional schemes aimed at "modernizing" the Third World, such as the Point Four Program beginning in the 1940s; to the South–South solidarity approach exemplified by the TAZARA Freedom Railway in the 1970s; to the neoliberal turn toward marketizing the Global South, embodied in the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) framework since the 2000s (p. 31). More specifically, the ebb and flow of Chinese state and corporate power in Africa since the founding

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of the People's Republic of China (PRC)—shaped by shifting geopolitical tensions over the past century—provides a clear political-economic context for the cultural reactions and frictions surrounding "Chineseness" in Africa that Lu documents later in the book.

What truly distinguishes this book from previous studies of global technology flows, however, is not merely the expansion of empirical terrain but Lu's incisive theoretical intervention: a framework of technology "translation" in place of technology "transfer," one that foregrounds the relational and fluid nature of sociotechnical processes. Drawing on science and technology studies (STS) scholarship, particularly John Law (2006), Lu conceptualizes translation as the process of bringing two or more entities into relation, a process that entails inherent partiality but not necessarily fixed intentions or linear causality. Through this intervention, Lu complicates the dominant paradigm that has long shaped scholarship on global technology circulation: a simplified one-way model of technological diffusion cast in the shadow of coloniality. What has often been framed as center–periphery technology transfer—the spread of access to seemingly stable technological objects—can instead be understood as involving less visible and more nuanced layers of translation among actors operating at different scales. This translation approach moves questions of technological authorship away from the center of analysis and instead directs attention to messy, unstable, yet creative encounters across difference—what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) calls the "frictions" of globalization.

Following a chapter that carefully introduces the field sites, research rationale, methodological choices, and reflexive positioning, the book moves into unpacking the network of actors and processes surrounding Transsion phones. The remaining chapters of the book follow the trajectory highlighted in Transsion's own promotional narratives, focusing on three key moments in the social life of its phones in Ghana: design, marketing, and after-sales service.

Chapter 3 examines the processes and tensions involved in designing Transsion phones for African consumers. Through cases involving SIM cards, battery capacity, and camera optimization, Lu reveals a distinctive Transsion approach to low-cost phone design that responds to local needs through a heterogeneous network of actors. This model stands in contrast to the often-romanticized high-tech innovation paradigm associated with Silicon Valley elites. Rather than simply celebrating the alterity of this approach, Lu complicates the notion of a Southern perspective on design by highlighting a critical paradox: the tension between Transsion's recent efforts to build intellectual property through patenting and its broader effects of decolonizing technology.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the issue of marketing, examining how Transsion distributes and promotes its phones in rural Ghana. Situating these practices within the longer history of Chinese companies' rural distribution strategies, the chapter illustrates how Ghanaian and Chinese distributors and retailers operating at different levels of Transsion's retail network both compete and collaborate as translators in the process of adapting the Transsion approach to the Ghanaian context.

Chapter 5 focuses on an institutional translator—Transsion's after-sales service system, Carlcare—bringing readers into the realm of technological maintenance and repair. As a leading repair service network in Ghana, Carlcare occupies a distinctive middle ground between the highly gatekept repair ecosystems of

first-party manufacturers and the informal economies of independent repairers. Here translation takes on additional dimensions, transforming not only the functionality of devices but also local labor practices by formalizing technicians within a professional service infrastructure. At the same time, Lu's encounters with local workers reveal the complexities of institutionalizing this middle-ground approach, which involves both the distribution and the extraction of knowledge and innovation.

Together, these three cases lead naturally to Lu's broader conceptual contribution: the articulation of a technology translation model of "deep ploughing," which moves beyond both the Silicon Valley intellectual-property paradigm and the stereotypical model of informal economies in the Global South. The concept of "deep ploughing" originates from a labor-intensive agricultural practice common in East Asian societies. Deep ploughing before sowing constitutes a form of "creative destruction" that "increase(s) soil porosity and enhance(s) nutrient exchange in the hope of elevating fertility in the long run" (p. 8). Through this metaphor, Lu synthesizes a business-model–cum–development approach that enables the intermingling of multiple knowledge systems in the hope of cultivating slow, organic, bottom-up growth.

The ontological commitment of the technology translation framework proves particularly productive for the analysis, as it allows messiness and contradictions in Lu's empirical account. The ethnography is at its strongest when it captures the entanglement of universalism and local particularity, trust and distrust, marketization and friendship within the lived experiences of Chinese and Ghanaian actors. Complementing Lu's analytical strengths is a consistent effort to historicize and contextualize the phenomena under study—from the political role of Ghanaian chiefs to the rural marketing strategies of Chinese enterprises—ensuring that the analysis remains firmly grounded in sociohistorical continuity.

One limitation stems from the book's ethnographic orientation. While the book excels at examining phenomena "sideways," mapping a wide network of adjacent practices and actors, it engages somewhat less with the more traditional task of studying "upward" toward the elite actors (Hannerz, 1998). The Chinese side of the China–Ghana relationship—particularly the intraorganizational processes through which these sociotechnical initiatives are initiated and coordinated—appears only intermittently through reflections encountered in the field. This partial visibility likely reflects the difficulty of accessing decision-making processes within large commercial organizations. As such, it leaves a significant piece of the puzzle open for future research.

As Lu notes in the conclusion, given the fluid and unstable nature of global technology flows, the case of Transsion does not yield definitive conclusions about a "deep ploughing" model as a fixed or enduring paradigm of South–South technology translation. Rather, it exemplifies a configuration specific to a particular sociohistorical moment. As transnational ventures such as Transsion continue to evolve, shaped by shifting commercial imperatives and broader geopolitical transformations, the model itself may take new directions. Nonetheless, the book's ambitious framing succeeds in delivering an empirically rigorous, middle-range theory of global technology flows that, as Lu argues, "is less mediated by a Northern episteme and so has the potential to ignite new Southern imaginations" (p. 144).

A firm step toward a de-westernized understanding of transnational sociotechnical encounters, and an engaging page-turner, the book will appeal to readers interested in global communication

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(particularly issues of South–South cooperation and China–Africa engagement), ICT4D, and the circulation of information, innovation, and technology. The substantive chapters also offer rich insights into related issues, including design justice, technology patents, rural development and marketing strategies, and technology repair.

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