

# CHINAMADE BRIEF



## Exporting the Chinese Instant City? A Lefebvrian New Town in Central Peru

*Lin Zhu, December 2020*



Figure 1. The new town of Nueva Morococha (Image credit: Lin Zhu)

This Brief is an excerpt of an MA thesis that aims to contribute to the theoretical debate on “Global China” using qualitative data gathered through four months of ethnographic research in Peru and China. Specifically, it studies the resettlement of Nueva Morococha as part of Chinalco’s Toromocho mining project in Central Peru. Applying critical tools offered by China scholars, this Brief challenges the view that Nueva Morococha is an export of a Chinese urban development model by demonstrating how such resettlements are one of the global mining industry’s common responses to dispossession. Moreover, it argues that resettlement has become a standardized process carried out by a handful of corporations and experts, producing almost indistinguishable resettlement plans underpinned by conventional understandings of modernity and development. This realization is illuminating because it guides researchers to approach “Global China” differently. Specifically, it shows that analyses fixated on the nationality of capital might obscure what Chinese capital actually does on the ground, thus providing

a less productive tool for scholars who are interested in the material reconfigurations of capital. This means de-centering China from Chinese foreign investments and prioritizing them for what they are, namely capitalist projects. Finally, I draw from Lefevre's seminal writing on Mourenx in France to examine the material consequences of the new town, which I argue offers a more productive analytical framework to understand Nueva Morococha.

## Introduction

Aluminum Corporation of China (Chinalco) is a Chinese State-owned Enterprise (SOE) founded in 2001 and supervised directly by the Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC). Chinalco is now the world's largest alumina producer and China's largest nonferrous metals enterprise, playing a strategic role in securing natural resources for national development. In August 2007, Chinalco bought Vancouver-based Peru Copper Inc. with \$860 million thereby acquiring ownership of the Toromocho copper mine in Peru. This acquisition was driven by a logic of "encompassing accumulation," or an "entrepreneurial statehood rationale," that pursues both geopolitical and geoeconomical interests (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011; Yeh 2016; Lee 2017). Copper is considered a strategic resource for Chinese development. China's copper reserves are relatively scarce, and its demand has intensified, growing from 20% of the world's total in 2003 to 39% in 2010. However, its reserves only increased from 1% to 4% of the world's total during the same period, creating an enormous supply-demand gap of 35% (Humphries 2015). Due to China's limited domestic reserves of copper ore and its relative low quality, the Chinese government has strategically promoted investment in copper production abroad to secure its domestic demand. Chinalco's acquisition will promise the Chinese state steady and cost-efficient access to copper supplies. Meanwhile, this transaction also helps Chinalco diversify its investment portfolio and become internationally competitive.

The Toromocho mine went into production in 2013 and an expansion phase framed under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was proposed and approved in 2017 to enhance its production output by 45% in 2020 (Chinalco News 2018). Instead of emphasizing the mine, which has been the focus of many studies, this Brief directs its attention to the less examined resettlement of Nueva Morococha where Chinalco's practices have "exceeded local standards and outperformed their peers" (Ray et al 2015).

## Nueva Morococha, a Chinese Model of Urban Development?

Nestled in the expansive Mantaro Valley in Central Peru, Nueva Morococha stands out as a geographically contained urban project with identical single-story houses, defined administrative boundaries and structured functional zones. Its planned landscape distinguishes itself from traditional Andean towns that usually develop incrementally and organically over time in relation to their surrounding geographies and in response to practical communal needs. In fact, the town resembles Chinese domestic resettlement projects that have radically transformed rural communities with central top-down spatial planning. With an increasing normalization of resettlement as a development project in its own right, in China the government has mobilized the discourse of relocation to achieve state agendas such as poverty alleviation, rural-urban integration and farmland consolidation (Zhang et al 2018; Rogers and Wilmsen 2019, 3). Hence, "China has developed a particular set of institutions, policies, finance instruments, and networks of expertise that allow resettlement projects to be implemented at scale and for shifting justifications" (Rogers and Wilmsen 2019, 3).

The scale and speed of the Chinese government's application of resettlement, when coupled with the fact that Nueva Morococha was financed entirely by Chinalco, have fueled a popular narrative which connects the new town with the Chinese urban development model. Castagnola (2013, 66), for example, considers





Figure 2. Overlook of Nueva Morococha, July 2019 (Image credit: Lin Zhu)

Nueva Morococha a “Chinese urban product for export” and an instant city resulting from “Chinese capitalism in their expansive regime, in which cities are not socio-cultural entities but corporative by-products.” Similarly, Nyíri (2017, 66) sees new towns like Nueva Morococha as a “low end version” of “new export products of Chinese urbanism.” In addition, he warns researchers to not treat instant cities merely as “prestige projects to whitewash extractive exploitation” but to pay attention to their historical development and future trajectories because they are “modelled on cities that sprung up in China’s remote areas as a result of a sudden trade, commodity, or tourist boom” (p. 66). This hypothetical paring of Nueva Morococha with the Chinese export of instant cities seems further plausible in the context of the BRI when the Chinese government has promised to build model cities for other countries. While the connection seems exciting and appears potent at a superficial glance, it quickly becomes untenable when interrogated closely with the critical tools offered by scholars studying “Global China.” By disaggregating actors involved in the resettlement planning and implementation and situating the project in both local history and global mining practices, I argue that instead of a city modelled on Chinese urban development, Nueva Morococha as a resettlement project exemplifies the global mining industry’s standard solution to problems of dispossession. Equally important is that mining-induced resettlements have become an established industry that relies on the same expertise and corporations on a global scale.

The generic use of “Chinese investment” conjures up an image of a single-minded, monolithic China, obscuring the interest, variety, capacity, and hierarchy of different forms of Chinese capital (Mawdsley 2008; Gonzalez-Vicente 2011; Lee 2014; Yeh 2016; Lee 2017; Klinger and Muldavin 2019). For example,

there is a wide range of Chinese investors including SOEs at different levels (central, provincial, and local), transnational corporations of Chinese origin (Huawei or Lenovo), private firms, and entrepreneurial migrants (Mawdsley 2008; Lee 2014; Yeh 2016). These entities might sometimes compete for markets or resources, or at other times collaborate to challenge other established foreign conglomerates. Meanwhile, Chinese foreign investments aim to achieve different goals such as geopolitical interests in “One China” recognition and extra-territorial control (Murton et al. 2016, Stallings 2016, Erikson and Chen 2007, Taylor 2002), or economic pursuits in profit maximization, investment diversification or market expansion (Gonzalez-Vicente 2012, Hofman 2016). Consequently, it is imperative to disaggregate Chinese actors and specify their motivations for going global (Mawdsley 2008; Gonzalez-Vicente 2011; Yeh 2016; Murton et al 2016; Lee 2017; Klinger and Muldavin 2019). Adopting this approach to examine the resettlement of Nueva Morococha proves to be constructive. Although a direct outcome of Chinalco’s exploration of the Toromocho mountain, it would be misleading to label the new town a Chinese export project without examining its development closely. Not only were the companies involved in the process Peruvian, but they also specialize in providing professional services in resettlement planning and implementation to the global mining industry.<sup>1</sup>

The becoming of Nueva Morococha relied on a group of corporations experienced in urban planning, project evaluation, resettlement consultation, construction, and management. The underpinning logic is that a clear division of labor not only improves efficiency and productivity but also reduces the total cost. As Castagnola (2013) himself points out, JP Planning S.A.C., a private planning company, carried out the overall city planning of Nueva Morococha, diagnosed land ownership and rights, negotiated land purchase and titling, prepared technical documents to carry out adverse possession procedures and calculated property tax. Meanwhile, CESEL S.A., a private Peruvian engineering consulting company, was in charge of project management, including design revisions, procurements, construction bidding processes, on-site supervision, and commissioning. JJC Contratistas Generales S.A, a Peruvian business group, was responsible for the construction of 685 houses and urban infrastructure in Nueva Morococha, and Social Capital Group, a private international professional services firm, played an indispensable role in facilitating the whole process. In Antigua Morococha, it conducted 6 censuses since 2006, evaluated housing conditions to calculate compensation, and organized community workshops. In Nueva Morococha, it arranged open house visits, helped families move and settle down in the new town. Today, the consulting firm is still active by helping Chinalco’s Community Relations office manage local affairs.

Writing about the resettlement induced by the La Granja project of Rio Tinto in Peru, Flynn and Vergarav (2015) pointed out the significance and prevalence of using external resettlement experts by mining corporations. Thus, it is unsurprising that these companies have built other resettlements in addition to Nueva Morococha. JP Planning S.A.C., for example, participated in the Las Bambas project of MMG in Cusco, which resulted in the resettlement of the Fuerabamba farming community to Nueva Fuerabamba. The company offered similar services such as negotiation and purchase of existing livestock in the area of project expansion, commercial appraisal of properties, and diagnostics on ownership and land rights. Social Capital Group too has extensive experience in mining-related resettlement planning and implementation.<sup>2</sup> In Peru, besides Nueva Morococha in Junín, it helped the private Argentinian

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that while none of the contracted firms building Nueva Morococha are Chinese or use Chinese laborer/materials, it would be equally misleading to label the project “Peruvian” given my argument challenging the impulse to label capital in terms of nationality.

<sup>2</sup> Social Capital Group specializes in analysis and management of “the social risks and opportunities associated with large-scale investment projects in both the public and private sectors” (Social Capital Group Website). In addition to resettlement planning, other SCG projects range from social management consultation for gold mining in Côte d’Ivoire to hydroelectric project evaluation in Costa Rica; from community relations advising in Guatemala to stakeholder analysis for carbon projects in Colombia; from technical advising for Indigenous issues of hydrocarbon development in Honduras to environmental and

Lumina Copper Corporation and the private Canadian firm Hudbay Minerals to design, negotiate and implement resettlement projects to acquire land for mine development in Cusco and Cajamarca respectively. Beyond Peru, Social Capital Group also partook in resettlement projects in Nicaragua (1), Colombia (5), Panama (1) and Madagascar (1). As Flynn and Vergarav (2015) noted:

External resettlement experts contributed to the development of the land access strategy and played an important role in up-skilling...resettlement definitions, issues and risks. In the industry at the time, outsourcing the execution of resettlement to third party consultants appeared to be the typical mechanism used by mining companies.

Hence, to some extent, resettlement planning and implementation has become an established industry catering to the inevitable dispossession of the global mining industry. In this sense, the production of Nueva Morococha does not reflect any unique traits of Chinese urban development but rather is one example of capitalism attempting to ameliorate destruction, gain legitimacy and manage dispossession.

This argument can be further substantiated by historicizing the development of Nueva Morococha. Rather than initiating the idea of resettlement, Chinalco inherited the commitment from Peru Copper Inc., whose then founder J. David Lowell (2014, 364-367) was concerned about “the problem of owners of primitive houses among the 5,000-population Morococho [sic], who had to be bought out in a deal in which they would get a free, modern house in a new town site.”<sup>3</sup> According to Sanborn and Chonn (2015), the Peruvian government was expected to build a new town for the residents in advance of Chinalco’s purchase. However, when Chinalco acquired this project, the company not only had to incorporate the resettlement as part of its investment but also become the sole financier instead of co-sponsoring it with the Peruvian government. According to Bill John Flores Rosas, resettlement project manager of Social Capital Group, this financial responsibility was assumed by Chinalco to be voluntary, in order to expedite the project’s operation because early resettlement of Antigua Morococha was necessary to begin the mine’s exploration.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, it is not in the company’s best interest to work with a foreign state bureaucracy even if it lessens the overall financial burden. However, this is less a Chinese way of doing business than a capitalist one: perhaps the amount of profit that will be generated by advancing the project is greater than its expenditure on the whole resettlement. Hence, the decision was made based primarily on capitalist calculation of profit and return on investment. Consequently, Nueva Morococha cannot be linked directly to China’s domestic use of resettlement projects nor should it be treated as an exported model.

In sum, no matter who owns and explores the Toromocho project, Nueva Morococha as a resettlement materializes a common story of capitalist accumulation by dispossession rather than representing something that is unique to Chinese foreign investment. Moreover, regardless of capital’s nationality, a similar blueprint, if not identical, has been developed for Nueva Morococha by experts specializing in urban planning, project evaluation and resettlement construction. In other words, Nueva Morococha can be found not only in Central Peru but everywhere as a mining by-product that can be inserted regardless of time and space.

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social feasibility analysis in Chile. The company provides social assessment, management planning and alignment, and implementation and outsourcing services for five sectors including mining, energy, oil and gas, transportation and infrastructure, as well as agriculture and forest.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewees of this study even traced the idea of resettlement back to the 1980’s when the mine was under the state-owned Centromin.

<sup>4</sup> A resettlement is a prerequisite without which Chinalco could not pass its Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) and other essential permits.



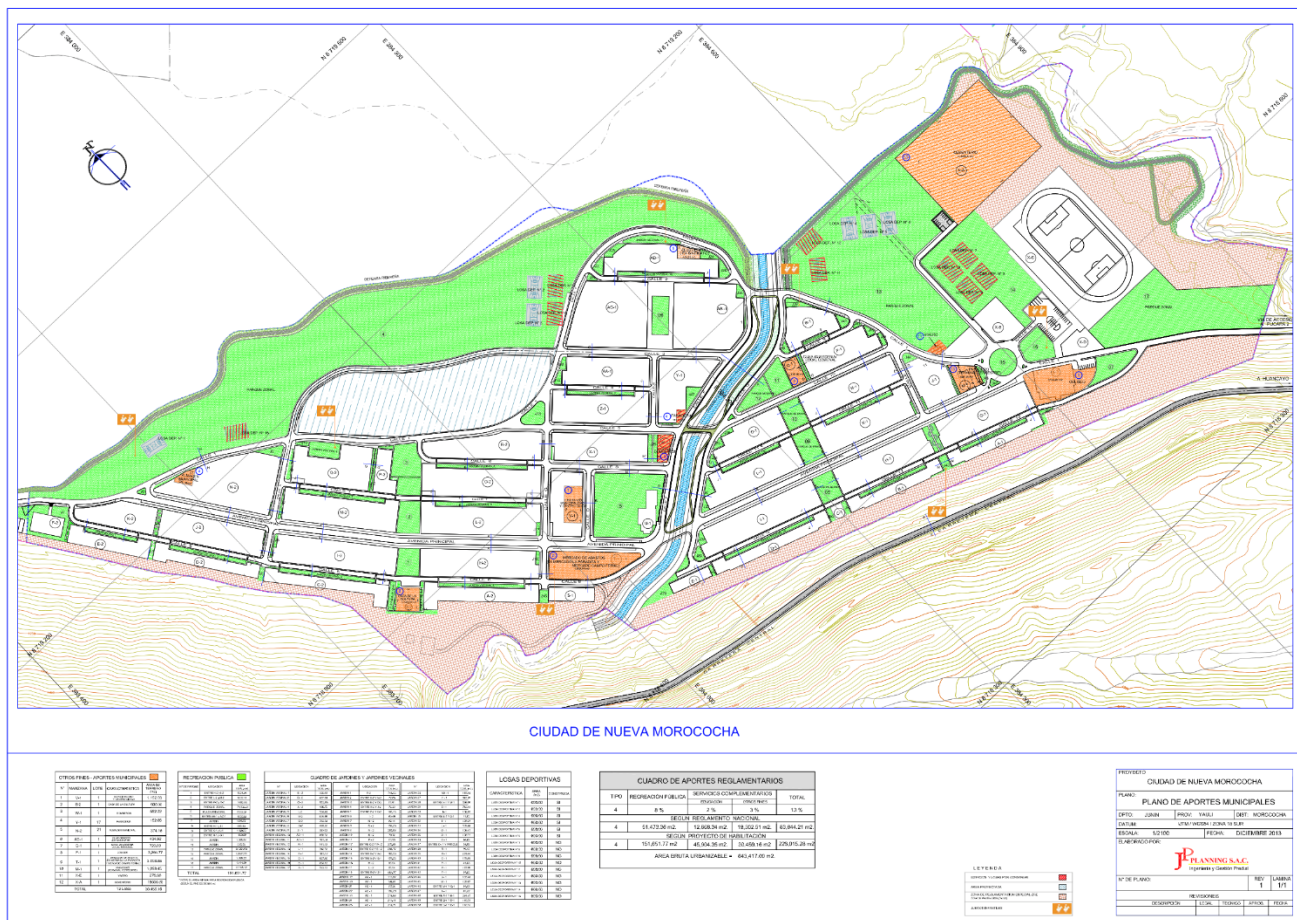


Figure 3. A planning map of Nueva Morococha

## A Lefebvrian “New Town”

Exactly six decades ago in France, Lefebvre stood on a hilltop gazing down upon the newly built industrial complex of Mourenx (Lefebvre 1995). He described the town as a “social text” in which “the nature of capitalist modernity can be deciphered with unusual clarity” (Wilson 2011, 993). Mourenx was built to accommodate workers of a natural gas processing plant after discoveries of abundant deposits in 1951. Its rigid spatial formation with identical rows of buildings conveyed a dreadful sense of “abstract homogeneity,” erasing the historical and cultural foundation upon which the town was produced (Lefebvre 1991, 370). The production of space Lefebvre referred to is not just the mere making and assembling of objects such as houses and roads, but also the materially created conditions on which everyday life is organized and social relations are altered. In Mourenx, Lefebvre identified a transition from a precapitalist peasant community to an industrial urbanization, a process in which people were separated from the means of production and forced to become wage laborers.<sup>5</sup> His *Notes on the new town* (1995) is a direct critique of a capitalist production of space that privileges abstract homogeneity over differences and transforms everyday experience of precapitalist communities.

<sup>5</sup> Antigua Morococha has been a mining town for centuries and the process of proletarianization had already been completed by the mid twentieth century. Thus, the transition to Nueva Morococha does not fundamentally alter the ways in which locals are tied to capitalist relations of production.

In this section, I borrow Lefebvre's writing on Mourenx and his theory of the social production of space to understand the material transformation in Nueva Morococha, which I argue is a more productive tool than the discursive framing of the resettlement as a Chinese urban development model. Different from Antigua Morococha where history is legible in its material landscape, Nueva Morococha is a place where history (time) and sense of belonging (space) become obscure if not nonexistent. Lefebvre (2000, 59) would condemn Nueva Morococha as "the negation of traditional towns" and an "irruption of the urban" (quoted in Soja 1996, 49) that is strictly structured to colonize everyday life. Indeed, Nueva Morococha's spatial layout points to the technocratic rationality in urban planning which unfortunately results in feelings of alienation and transformations of everyday life. Embedded in the ostensible splendor and glory of the newly built town are profound feelings of suffering and sorrow.

Looking down at Nueva Morococha from the Central Highway, what comes into view are infrastructures arranged in rigid spatial layouts: rows of identical houses in a grid, zones of commercial activities and education blocks. For Lefebvre, the new town is the epitome of capitalist modernity materialized as "quantitative growth and qualitative alienation" (Wilson 2011, 996). He considers the production of space disruptive and devastating because the process is filled with contradictions inherent in a planned landscape, especially under capitalism (Lefebvre 1991; Gordillo 2014). It is precisely the materiality of lived experiences of alienation and the transformation of everyday life that interest Lefebvre. And these matters could not be more pronounced in Nueva Morococha.

One of the apparent contradictions is between the modernist pursuit of efficiently planned urban space and the lived experience of an increasingly difficult life under technocratic planning. Residents in the new town now live a spatially fragmented life with concentrated zones of commercial activities, administrative services and residential areas. This spatial division not only disrupts the fluid and semiautonomous life back in Antigua Morococha by imposing hierarchical spatial relations but also renders local people legible and controllable. Many residents interviewed for this study expressed fears of being monitored or surveilled by Chinalco or its employees. The grid design is particularly crucial in restructuring everyday experience in Nueva Morococha (see Figure 3). Feelings of alienation are present among the resettled because family visits no longer happen organically within the highly individualized units and limited space, and there is a sense of disorientation that emerges from walking around a neighborhood of identical looking houses. Studying a state-planned resettlement in Chiapas, Mexico, Wilson (2011) provides a similar observation in which quasi-private and quasi-public communal space between streets and houses have disappeared in the new town. Whereas traditionally built houses usually have porches open towards streets, providing pedestrians shelter from sun, rain or for conversations, newly built housing complexes are surrounded by high-wire fences with porches facing inward, creating a highly individualistic and alienating feeling. Therefore, different from the dynamically interwoven social relations embedded in Antigua Morococha's landscape, the rigid spatial planning of Nueva Morococha conveys a sense of isolation through disembodied abstraction and clear-cut separation between private and public space.

A spatial restructuring of Nueva Morococha also resulted in waves of out-migration. Whereas the majority out-migrated due to dim economic prospects, a handful of residents, knowing Antigua Morococha was forever gone, left simply because they felt culturally and socially alienated in a segregated town. Some businesses in Nueva Morococha mainly cater to Chinalco and its mining operations, leaving locals' needs unattended if not ignored. This unfortunately transformed certain spaces into socially segregated areas, reinforcing the stringent structures imposed by the town's original spatial design. For example, most restaurants in town have contracts with Chinalco and its contractors, so their daily operations are structured around the mine's operation. They only open from 6 am to 8 am for breakfast, 11:30 am to 1:30 pm for lunch, and 6 pm to 8 pm for dinner. Similarly, hotels and hostels in Nueva Morococha are mostly filled with temporary subcontractors and migrants looking for jobs.



Figure 4. Nueva Morococha (Image Credit: Lin Zhu)

In order to efficiently manage their employees, some of Chinalco's direct contractors rent empty houses to turn them into dormitories. Internet cafés were popular gathering spots for workers to either print receipts for reimbursement or use computers for games. Hence, although Nueva Morococha was built to accommodate those displaced by the Toromocho project, a modern, urban and business-oriented town further marginalized local residents by rendering them as outsiders in certain spaces of consumption.

Contemporary Nueva Morococha is one of the many "new towns" that have emerged under rapid global transformations of capitalist modernity and neoliberal reform.<sup>6</sup> Instead of a project that accommodates the displaced, Nueva Morococha is a capitalist production of space that attempts to rationalize dispossession and justify extractive industry in the name of development. Consequently, the resettlement becomes an abstract space of capitalist modernity where accumulation is the primary imperative, and where feelings of alienation and transformation of everyday life are ubiquitous (Lefebvre 1995). Moreover, conceived and built

as a technocratic and corporate project, its functionalist spatial layout bears little similarity to the heterogeneous and semiautonomous villages its residents used to inhabit. As summarized by Wilson (2011, 998), the new town is where "the symbolic richness and creative autonomy of daily life are progressively eviscerated and replaced by the homogenization and fragmentation of a technocratic rationality projected onto reality through the planned production of space."

## Conclusion

Manifestations of global China are manifold on the ground as local encounters with Chinese capital are neither universal nor homogenous. Therefore, a focus on case studies helps avoid misleading generalizations. Achieving this means disaggregating a "monolithic China," differentiating "varieties of capital" and sectors of investment, contextualizing Chinese investment in host countries as well as at the community level, and attending to China's domestic development. In a nutshell, global China is contextual, relational, processual and contingent, requiring an ethnographic approach to generate rigorous and trustworthy analyses that attend to spatiality, scale and time.

Generally speaking, Chinese SOE investments abroad carry both geoeconomic and geopolitical interests and this duality distinguishes Chinese state capital from many private forms. Depending on where the investment is going and in which sector it is taking place, geopolitical considerations might outweigh

<sup>6</sup> Nueva Morococha is a *neoliberal* "new town" because it is a "privately funded public project" (Stauffer 2012) rather than a "technology of power" for state control (Wilson 2011), and its creation is a direct result of Peru's neoliberal reform which opened the country's minerals for privatization by transnational corporations. In other words, Nueva Morococha is configured by capitalist social relations and *corporate* power.



those of geoeconomic ones, or the other way around. However, large public corporations such as Lenovo or Huawei might also engage in market activity with state interests in mind because they participate in strategic sectors such as mining and cutting-edge technology developments that are considered highly relevant for national security and state economic planning (such as Huawei's 5G technology). Nevertheless, the history of the internationalization of American corporations and others tells a similar story of entanglements between private and public, and state and non-state interests. Thus, singling out Chinese foreign investments, both private and state, as a culturally specific form of national capital is counterproductive. This means de-centering China from Chinese foreign investments and prioritizing them for what they are, namely capitalist projects.

Situating the case of Nueva Morococha in the broader context of the global mining industry helps correct the view that it is “an export of Chinese urbanism” (Castagnola 2013; Nyíri (2017). With China's transformation into a global force, Lee (2017) argues that “global China” should be a subject of inquiry that pushes China Studies beyond China's territorial borders. However, the phenomenon of global China should be taken as a provocative entry point and a productive analytical tool, grounded in empirical studies, rather than a discourse found in abstract debate. In the case of Nueva Morococha, it is clear that Lefevre's production of space offers a more grounded tool to approach the resettlement as a capitalist production of space, allowing us to study its material consequences of “Global China” on the ground than the discursive framing based on capital's nationality.

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