How the Chinese Copy became the Prototype:
Shenzhen and the Moral Perils of Technological Promise

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Silvia Lindtner is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan in the School of Information, and the associate director of the new Center for Ethics, Society, and Computing (ESC). Her forthcoming book, Prototype Nation: China and the Contested Promise of Innovation, unpacks in ethnographic and historical detail the visions of the global maker movement to prototype alternatives to the precarious conditions of neoliberal capitalism by democratizing entrepreneurial life. Lindtner’s work contributes to science and technology studies, China studies, design, cultural anthropology, and technology policy.

Abstract:
This talk unpacks how it happened that the Chinese city of Shenzhen transformed in the Western tech imagination from a place decried as a site of low quality and copycat production into a laboratory of exuberant scale whose “backwardness” was promising for the future. Following the financial crisis 2007/08, a series of influential actors, tangled up with Western networks of venture capital, innovation, and hacktivism, turned to Shenzhen to redeem tech’s broken promises amidst rising concerns over the ethics of data and AI. They portrayed Shenzhen (and China writ large) through colonial tropes of othering, framing its associations with fake and copycat as an opportunity for investment, to be celebrated for its speed and lax regulations. The talk zooms in on the new organizational models and spaces of work—incubators, coworking spaces, makerspaces, fablabs—as well as the labor that were necessary to nurture this displacement of technological promise onto what was long imagined as its underbelly—manufacturing, supply chains, trade, and piracy.

Details:
Thursday, November 14, 2019
4:30 - 6:00pm
Teleconference Room (4th floor)
Alexander Library
169 College Avenue
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