HOW DO LOCAL ACTORS IN CHILE FRAME CHINA'S INVOLVEMENT IN LITHIUM EXTRACTION: AS DEVELOPMENT OR AS NEOCOLONIAL EXTRACTION?

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Chilean actors frame China's involvement in lithium extraction in the Atacama Desert, Chile, in the global green energy transition context. The thesis argues that the Chilean government presents lithium mining as an opportunity for national development. At the same time, the civil society and indigenous people remain much more critical, pointing out the ecological degradation, exclusionary politics and power asymmetries. Through the use of critical discourse analysis, the study draws on sources such as government statements, NGO reports, and Indigenous testimonials to uncover how narratives about development and sustainability are constructed or contested. The findings reveal three main framings: lithium as an opportunity for green development, lithium as greenwashing concealing destructive practices, and lithium as the violator of ecosystems and indigenous land. The official discourse echoes Chinese concepts of "win-win cooperation", while civil activists expose issues due to asymmetries regarding environmental burden and knowledge recognition. This thesis concludes that green extractivism poses serious risks in reproducing historical inequalities under a new eco-friendly label and underscores the importance of including marginalised voices in debates over sustainability, development and decision-making.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Ielyzaveta Pliatsuk**, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics and Society, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 19 May 2025

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INTRODUCTION

The race for critical minerals is pressing due to the urgent need to address climate change. Lithium, in particular, is one of the most vital elements in creating rechargeable batteries for electric vehicles and consumer electronics like phones and laptops. As of 2024, Chile has the highest reserves of lithium in the world (Torres et al. 2023) and ranks third in overall lithium resources. Chile's most prominent lithium exporter is China, both in terms of import and investment. However, the extraction of national resources and purchasing those by foreign nation-states have historically caused controversy in Latin America. The debate mainly centres around concerns over the sovereignty of natural resources and whether their export genuinely contributes to national development or merely serves as a disguised form of exploitation.

This topic is important to research because it raises critical questions about global environmental and developmental justice. In theory, communities that live near resource-rich areas should be the first to benefit from extraction. However, often, this is not the case. For example, the area surrounding the Chilean Atacama desert, where the main lithium reserves are located, continuously falls below the national average in terms of employment and poverty rates(Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia 2023, 44),(Banco Central de Chile, n.d.).

As the green energy transition accelerates globally, questions emerge about how this shift may reproduce old patterns of exploitation under a new, green sustainable label. According to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Energy Transition Index, which evaluates countries' ability to provide sustainable, secure, and affordable energy systems, Chile is ranked 17th and China is ranked 20th globally(World Economic Forum 2024, 12). Below, one may

find Figure 1, which shows countries placed on the matrix according to two scales - system readiness for green energy transition and system performance.

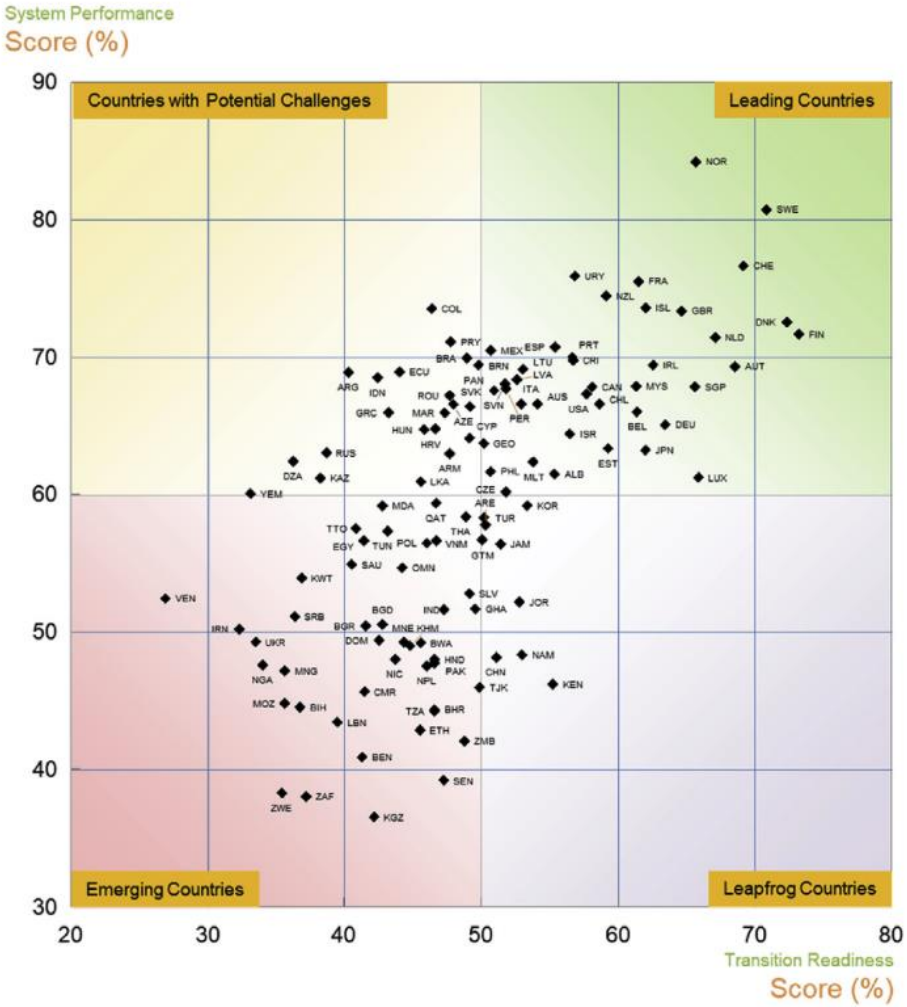

Figure 1. *"*System performance/transition readiness matrix."

Source:(Singh et al. 2019, 6).

Similar extraction processes have been implemented for nickel in Indonesia, cobalt in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and rare earth elements in China, frequently damaging the environment and concerns surrounding labour and Indigenous rights. In this context, comprehending how various Chilean actors frame China's involvement in lithium extraction is

essential. These narratives provide insights into broader tensions around environmental justice, postcolonial dependency, and the global inequalities accompanying green development.

This thesis will analyse the discourse surrounding resource extraction to understand how different actors frame China's involvement. It is important to clarify the goal of this thesis, which is not to evaluate the actual dynamics of the China-Chile relationship, but rather to analyse how it is represented in discourse, so that the reader should expect a focus on narratives and perceptions, not empirical verification. Given the scope and limitations of an undergraduate thesis, the analysis will focus on a relatively narrow aspect of the broader extraction relationship. The analysis draws on Chilean perspectives, not Chinese intentions or domestic policies. Including both sides would risk oversimplifying the issue and affecting the depth of the study.

The Research Question this thesis will attempt to answer is: "To what extent does the discourse on China's role in lithium extraction in Chile reflect global asymmetries in the green energy transition?". To address this question, the thesis will present a literature review that outlines key themes in global discourse on resource extraction, not limited to just Latin America.

Literature Review

Resource extraction has been a contested field of research, with some claiming that extractionism is an outstanding opportunity for the development of the state. Alternatively, others remain more critical and emphasise exploitative dimensions. The following literature review will examine this debate through various thematic lenses, including colonialism, capitalism, dependency, developmentalism, environment, sustainability, and Indigenous perspectives. This literature review does not attempt to cover each of the seven themes in full

detail, nor does it aim to introduce the most influential scholars or theoretical developments within every field. Instead, the review focuses on the ideas and authors most relevant to the case study. The goal is to highlight the concepts and debates that are most relevant to eventually understanding the narratives about China's involvement in lithium extraction in Chile.

Colonial extraction established an early form of global asymmetry, systematically draining resource-rich regions to fuel the growth of imperial powers. A recurring theme in writings on extraction in the Global South is the enduring legacy of colonialism. Colonial projects initiated by European powers across Africa, Latin America, and South Asia were not limited to military or political control. Colonialism operated as a comprehensive system of resource extraction designed to enrich the colonising powers. In "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa", Walter Rodney writes how European empires subjugated African labour and extracted Africa's natural resources to accelerate their economy (Rodney 1974). Similarly, Eduardo Galeano in "Open Veins of Latin America" describes systematic extraction of gold, silver, copper, tin, oil, sugar, and other resources from Latin America, leaving the continent economically dependent and drained (Galeano 1997, Chap. 1-3). Some authors argue that contemporary systems of resource extraction continue the colonial legacies of the past.

The relationship between colonialism and capitalism is further emphasised in critiques of neocolonialism. The Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah, described how colonialism shaped political and economic structures of the 1960s in ways that outlasted the formal empire. Through control of trade, investment, and resources, former colonisers exercised control and constructed systems of global capital accumulation. These systems solidified global asymmetries by enabling wealth and value to flow disproportionately from the resource-rich periphery to the industrialised core. Resource export benefited the global North disproportionately by accelerating their industrialisation (Nkrumah 1965, 239). Building on

this, Eduardo Gudynas connects history to contemporary time and argues that the systems that were constructed during the colonial times of resource exports to European metropolises still serve as a basis for the overexploitation of labour and nature in the present day(Gudynas 2015, 33). Gudynas introduces the term extractivism and defines three preconditions for resource extraction to be considered problematic: the resources need to be extracted in high volumes, with more than half to be eventually exported abroad, and those resources need to be further processed by the country of purchase (Gudynas 2015, 15). Extractivism, he argues, reinforces unequal trade relations and undermines national sovereignty, continuing colonial imperialist capital accumulation and inequality systems.

Another central theme in the literature on resource extraction is dependency, which is mainly put forward by the dependency theory, which focuses on the position of nation states in the global economy and attempts to explain inequality between industrialised and resource-exporting nation states. Dependency Theory outlines how the underdevelopment of certain regions is not a stage on the way to economic development, but rather is a result of global capitalist structures that transfer value from the periphery countries to the core(Dos Santos 1970, 231–36). One of its foundational scholars, Raúl Prebisch, conceptualised a theory on the Declining Terms of Trade. According to Prebisch, the prices for natural resources decline over time relative to the value of manufactured goods they import, reinforcing economic asymmetries (Prebisch 1950, 8–9). Expanding on this critique, André Gunder Frank argues that underdevelopment is relative to the development, meaning that the core develops by actively underdeveloping the periphery (Frank 1967, 3–5). The World Systems Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein further supports this logic. The theory splits the world into the core (economically developed, dominating nations) and the periphery and semi-peripheries (the underdeveloped, often exploited countries) (Wallerstein 2004, 28–29). According to this model, countries in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia often supply raw materials and cheap labour to the

developed and industrialised core. Countries in the global South are locked in a structurally subordinate position. Through such a lens, it becomes clear that extractivism is not limited to an economic strategy. However, it is a structure that undermines resource-rich states' sovereignty and developmental autonomy. What is new in the context of 2025 is that China, once considered part of the periphery, is now increasingly viewed by many scholars as part of the core. This shift in China's position represents an important research gap, which Chapter Three will examine in greater detail.

Developmentalism offers a contrasting perspective to the dominant critique of extractivism, which regards natural resources as a potential blessing rather than a curse. Scholars such as Glauco Arbix and Scott Martin argue that in Latin American countries, resource extraction can generate significant revenue, and considering a strong regulatory state, eventually, profits can become the building blocks of development and structural transformation(Arbix and Martin 2010, cited in Veltmeyer 2012, 59). This school of thought has been evolving into what is now called new developmentalism, elaborated on by Bresser-Pereira, who emphasises the active role of the state and international negotiations by the state, ensuring prioritisation of public interests (Bresser-Pereira 2016, 336–37). Resource nationalism within this framework is not merely about control over resources. However, it is about using power to align economic surplus with long-term objectives such as industrialisation and technological and social development. Bresser-Pereira also highlights the influence of international financial institutions, noting that the World Bank has also emphasised factors like industrial policy, economic planning, and institutional strength as essential preconditions for development in resource-rich countries (Bresser-Pereira 2016, 336). According to this framework, the outcome of extractivism, whether it results in dependency or development, depends mainly on the capacity, stability, and strategic orientation of state institutions. While

this literature offers a more optimistic view, critics argue that the conditions required for developmentalism are rare and often obstructed by the global asymmetries described earlier.

Furthermore, environmental degradation due to resource extraction has become an increasingly central component of the critique within the resource extraction debate. Scholars argue that environmental harm comes as a systematic outcome of developmental models that value economic profits over the sustainability of the practices. Downey, Bonds and Clark introduce the concept of "ecologically unequal exchange", which describes how peripheral nations are the ones that are bearing the burden of resource extraction, while the core gets to retain the benefits of industrial transformation and consumption (Downey, Bonds, and Clark 2010, 418). The literature also draws on concepts such as socio-metabolic conflict, ecological violence, and environmental injustice to illustrate how local communities are the ones to bear pollution, sometimes forced relocation and ecosystem destruction. These perspectives frame environmental degradation not as an unintended consequence but as a structurally embedded feature of the global extractivist system.

Environmental concerns are not ignored, especially in the context of rising global temperatures. However, critics argue that while a genuine transformation in the sustainability of practices has yet to occur, a shift in the language used to frame those practices - the so-called "green" transformation - has already occurred. Resource extraction is often framed as a necessary component of the green energy transition. Voskoboynik and Andreucci refer to a phenomenon - "green extractivism" as a discourse strategy rebranding environmentally and socially detrimental practices as the solution to climate change and decarbonisation (Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2022). Through this framing, extractivism is no longer a destructive practice that must be immediately stopped, but as an essential contribution to global goals of combating climate change. Authors remain critical of further rounds of

commodification and territorial expansion as the solution to finding the "socio-ecological fix", which poses a high risk of reproducing the same structures of inequality and environmental harm while using sustainability-friendly rhetoric.

Finally, another dimension that is necessary to be aware of to understand the full capacity of the effects posed by extractivism is the perspectives of indigenous people. While the indigenous communities are the most affected by resource extraction, their voices often get marginalised in decision-making, academic and public discourse. The literature not only emphasises the importance of consultation, but also calls attention to the substantive rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly their entitlement to the land and natural resources they have traditionally inhabited and looked after. One of the key international instruments affirming these rights is ILO Convention No. 169 (Internationale Arbeitsorganisation 2013), which recognises the right of tribal people on ancestral lands to use, manage and conserve the water, land or resources. The convention urges the states to obtain a "free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC)" of the indigenous community before invasive extractionist procedures (Internationale Arbeitsorganisation 2013, 38). The most important aspect of the UN framework is that the indigenous people have a right to be consulted and to determine the outcomes of decisions that affect their land. However, Indigenous knowledge and political claims are frequently dismissed or excluded from dominant institutional frameworks, which reinforces global asymmetries in the types of knowledge and authority that are recognised as legitimate in environmental governance.

Overall, the literature shows that contemporary extraction practices, regardless of the framing as development, sustainability, or green transition, reproduce historical inequalities between the global North and South.

Methodology.

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how China's role in lithium extraction in Chile is represented across different Chilean actor groups. This study does not intend to assess the empirical dynamics of the relations between the two states. Instead, the analysis focuses on how these relations are constructed, contested, and legitimised through language.

While attempting to answer the research question - "To what extent does the discourse on China's role in lithium extraction in Chile reflect global asymmetries in the green energy transition?" -this study examines how discourses around China's involvement in lithium extraction reflect deeper global hierarchies within the green transition. This study specifically focuses on the thematic content of discourse. The thesis explores how concepts such as development, sustainability, neocolonialism, Indigenous rights, and South-South cooperation are invoked by different actor groups. The aim is to explore dominant and competing narratives and the power relations they sustain.

To answer the research question, the analysis draws on a range of publicly available sources, including government speeches and policy documents, reports and testimonials from civil society organisations and Indigenous community members from the Atacama region, as well as academic commentary from experts involved in the public debate. The three actor groups - government, civil society, and Indigenous communities - were selected to incorporate diverse perspectives and capture contrasting narratives.

This study is limited by the availability of public texts and the possibility of some Indigenous perspectives being mediated through translation or third-party interpretation. Moreover, as a researcher, I recognise that my positionality is outside the Chilean context, influencing my interpretation of the sources.

Chapter One introduces the reader to the broader context of extractivism in Chile, China's and Chile's economic cooperation, and China's involvement in resource extraction, and the Belt and Road Initiative. This chapter provides the foundation for understanding the global power asymmetries and the background that shapes today's discourse about dependency and exploitation.

Chapter Two analyses the rhetoric around green transition and sustainability, emphasising the legitimisation of lithium mining through "green" or "eco-friendly" language. This chapter examines how the Chilean government presents lithium as an opportunity for development while minimising the associated socioeconomic and ecological impact. In contrast, civil society reports highlight the tensions between environmental responsibility and extractivist practices.

Chapter Three focuses on how China is framed across actor discourses: as a development partner, an ally, or a new imperial actor. It investigates how the Chilean government, Indigenous communities, NGOs, and the Chinese diplomatic presence establish conflicting narratives regarding China's involvement. Critical voices emphasise the issues of green neocolonialism, unequal power relations, and limited local benefits despite the official portrayal of China as a strategic and cooperative partner.

The chapters offer various perspectives on the discourse around China's involvement in Chile's lithium sector and reflect broader discussions regarding global asymmetries in the green energy transition.

CHAPTER 1: CONTEXT

Extractionism and Lithium in Chile.

Chile has a long history of resource extraction that started in the 1500s after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores. During the colonial times, gold, silver, and later copper were the most sought-after materials, attracting European powers to the region(Collier and Sater 2004, 76, 77) . Exporting natural resources has played a central role in Chile's economy. For instance, the League of Nations identified Chile as the country most affected by the Great Depression, as approximately 80% of its government revenue at the time came from the export of copper and nitrates (Baklanoff 1958, 62).

Today, copper remains Chile's most important export, accounting for around 40% of national export revenues(Ebert and La Menza 2015, 106). The country is also known for its vast lithium reserves and other mineral resources such as iron and nitrates. "Lithium Triangle" is a term that was created for the special area that covers Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia, which has the world's largest lithium reserves. On the right, Figure 2 illustrates the geographical scope of this area.

Figure 2: *"The Latin American Lithium Triangle".*

Source: (Perotti and Coviello 2015, 50)

Since Chile was historically dependent on resource exports, this shaped the country's developmental trajectory. Such patterns created long-standing patterns of economic vulnerability. Therefore, contemporary narratives about lithium can not be understood without recognising Chile's colonial past and resource politics.

Below, Table 1 presents the statistics from the SQM report. It shows that Chile ranks first in economically extractable lithium. Hence, lithium represents a significant strategic advantage for the Chilean economy, even though the country does not possess the largest resources. Nevertheless, researchers warn that describing lithium as a "strategic advantage" could conceal extraction's risks, especially regarding environmental degradation, Indigenous marginalisation, and economic dependence on fluctuating global markets.

Lithium Resources (Total known lithium in the ground, whether or not it's economically viable to extract)			Lithium Reserves (Economically extractable lithium)		
Rank	Country	Resources (t)	Rank	Country	Reserves (t)
1	Bolivia	21,000,000	1	**Chile**	**8,600,000**
2	Argentina	17,000,000	2	Australia	2,800,000
3	**Chile**	**9,000,000**	3	Argentina	1,700,000
4	United States	6,800,000	4	Others	1,100,000
5	Australia	6,300,000	5	**China**	**1,000,000**
6	**China**	**4,500,000**	6	United States	630,000
7	Congo	3,000,000	7	Canada	370,000
8	Germany	2,500,000	8	Zimbabwe	280,000
9	Canada	1,700,000	9	Brazil	95,000
10	Mexico	1,700,000	10	Portugal	60,000

Table 1*: "Global Lithium reserves and resources."*

Source: (Torres et al. 2023, 212)

Demand for lithium is only expected to grow in the approaching decade. Due to the rapid transformation of energy sources from fossil fuels to renewable energy, lithium prices have increased dramatically between 2011 and 2022. The two figures below visualise the trends

described above. Due to the international pressure to address the dangers posed by climate change, the biggest carbon dioxide emitters and polluters are taking advantage of the opportunity to dominate the renewable green energy market.

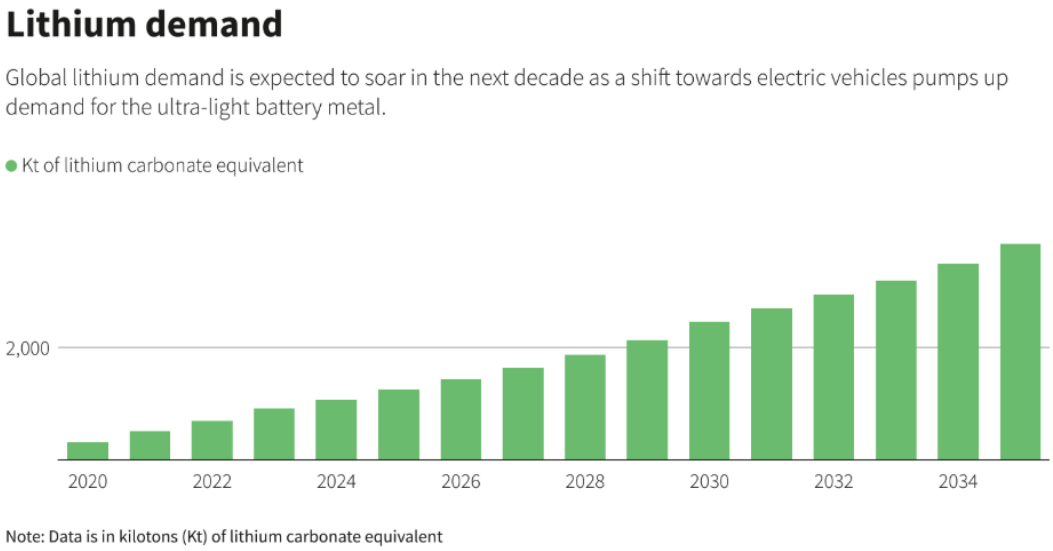

Figure 3: *"Lithium demand, Projection: 2020-2034."*

Source:(Graham, Rupp, and Brungard 2021)

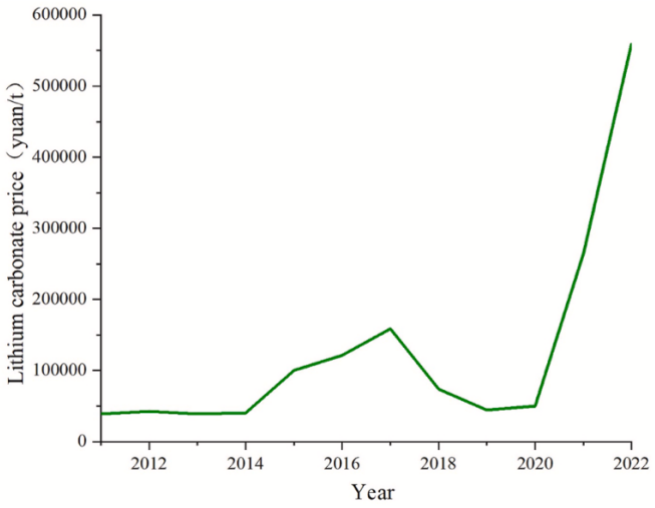

Figure 4: *"Lithium carbonate price from 2011 to 2022."*

Source:(Li, Wang, and Chen 2024, 6)

Data from 2020 shows that lithium has various uses. The overwhelming majority, 71%, is used for rechargeable batteries, 14% for glass and ceramics, 4% for lubricating greases, and the rest for steelmaking, polyester production, aluminium metallurgy, and more (U.S. Geological Survey 2021, 1). Lithium is not only vital for electric vehicles and consumer electronics but is also a strategic asset in geopolitical competition, specifically between China and the West.

China-Chile Relations in the Context of Extractivism.

According to Liebetreu, starting from the 1970s, during the administration of Chilean President Salvador Allende, Chile adopted a pragmatic approach to foreign policy when addressing China(Liebetreu 2021, 83). In 1970, Chile was the first Latin American country to recognise the People's Republic of China. The ideological alignment around principles such as non-interference and regional economic cooperation created a foundation for sustainable bilateral engagement. Later, Chile became the first Latin American country to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China, which entered into force in 2006 (Paulo Afonso B. Duarte 2023, 504).

China often frames its relationships with Latin American countries as a win-win cooperation between the collective South, arguing that China is economically developing. In 2018, Chile formally signed an agreement to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Duarte, Leandro, and Galán 2023, 505). The BRI has functioned as a platform for advancing lithium extraction as Chile's contribution to the global energy transition. Critics

claim that this collaboration perpetuates Chile's status as a raw material supplier, reflecting past patterns of dependency.

Raúl Bernal-Meza describes the relationship between China and Latin America as complementary but unequal(Bernal-Meza 2020). He builds on the concept of World-Systems Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein, specifically conceptualising China as the core and Latin America as the periphery or semi-periphery. He describes how, despite the Chinese framing of the cooperation as a "win-win" approach, the dynamics are not significantly different from those previously in place with exploitative states. Bernal-Meza argues that the export of raw materials from Latin America to China, followed by the re-import of manufactured goods, accelerates China's industrialisation while failing to contribute to Latin America's modernisation, instead depleting its natural resources (Bernal-Meza 2020, 262).

China's economic strategy and trade structure incentivise Latin American countries to stay in a limited, dependent role in the global economy - the role of raw materials exporters like lithium, copper and others. By limiting the investment to the mining, oil, and infrastructure sectors to extract and transport materials and not building factories, technology, or industrial capacity in Latin America, China has established a model of engagement that deepens structural dependency(Bernal-Meza 2020, 258–59).

CHAPTER 2: GREEN FRAMING AND SUSTAINABILITY

This chapter explores how green extractivism is framed by various actors. Green extractivism is a term that refers to resource extraction motivated by being a "solution" to climate change, whether contributing to energy transition or supplying raw materials for low-carbon technologies such as electric vehicles or solar panels (Dunlap, Verweijen, and Tornel 2024, 438). The Chilean government frames lithium extraction as a unique opportunity for economic growth, contributing to the nation's development. Civil society challenges this framing by pointing out the environmental degradation and marginalisation of indigenous people. This chapter takes the analysis further by proposing that the green energy transition introduces a new layer of global asymmetry. Inequalities are driven not only by resource extraction but also by new asymmetries reinforced through disparities in labour intensity, capital accumulation, and the continued reproduction of global capitalism under the guise of environmental responsibility.

Lithium as a sustainable solution

The Chilean government consistently frames lithium extraction not as a neocolonialism or exploitation, but as a pathway to national development and an enhancement of global relevance. The Chilean President Gabriel Boric presented the "National Lithium Strategy" (NLS), framing lithium as a strategic national resource and emphasising state-led development (Boric 2023). He claimed lithium extraction is "the best chance to move to a sustainable developed economy". He outlined five elements of the framework that will be in place in order to conduct extractionism sustainably. He outlined active involvement of the state, creation of National Lithium Company, collaboration with the public and private enterprises, use of the

most up-to-date technology to minimise environmental impact, participation and involvement of indigenous communities and promotion of extractionism and resource preservation (Boric 2023).

This framing positions Chile in a proactive partner position that benefits from and controls its natural resources, contrary to a passive agent giving up its sovereignty over resources and being exploited. Boric's speech emphasises how lithium is not a source of dependency, but rather an asset for national modernisation and global competitiveness. By putting more emphasis on "strategic resource", "state-led development" and "sustainable developed economy" framing, the narrative shifts from dependency to development, modernisation, and ecological responsibility. President's framing echoes developmentalist ideas that claim that natural resources would lead towards a structural transformation due to the economic surplus being directed to industrialisation and social welfare.

The 2023 report from Chile's government titled "National Lithium Strategy for Chile and its people" supports a developmentalist narrative, framing lithium extraction as an opportunity to invest in science, technology, and innovation (Gobierno de Chile 2023, 6, 11). The report emphasises modernisation and knowledge generation as a way to bring Chile higher up in the global value chain (Gobierno de Chile 2023, 16–17). The framing does not explicitly reject extractivism but attempts to reshape how it is seen by emphasising modernisation, national autonomy, and long-term benefits.

Coherence in developmentalist language may be found when looking at Chile's foreign policy rhetoric. The Chilean Ministry of Foreign Affairs describes how, in 2023, Chile and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding. This agreement will "strengthen exchange and cooperation in areas like … Belt and Road Initiative … (and) clean energy". The ministry describes the partnership's aim to “modernise the bilateral agenda, deepen the relationship and

continue to benefit the people of both countries" (‘Chile and China Sign 13 Cooperation Agreements Aimed at Modernizing Their Bilateral Agenda’ 2023)

By using lithium extraction as a pathway to increasing Chile's global significance within the context of global cooperation, energy transition, and economic diplomacy, Chile is strengthening the narrative of mutual development rather than asymmetrical dependency. This framing aligns closely with the Chinese "win-win cooperation" narrative, which stresses the foundations of mutual development and non-interference.

Overall, the Chilean government's narratives consistently frame lithium extraction as a strategic opportunity, emphasising responsibility, sustainability, innovation, and growth. Such framing makes the extractive project modern and legitimate while strategically downplaying the associated socio-environmental risks.

Greenwashing and Environmental Harm

In contrast, Chilean civil society actors frame lithium extraction, particularly President Boric's National Lithium Strategy, as a further continuation of environmental degradation and unequal power dynamics stemming from colonial times. Actors highlight how sustainability claims are misleading, and narratives attempt to mask the real extent of extractivism's environmental and social impact.

A local NGO - the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA) has released a report incorporating voices of local organisations, journalists and indigenous communities (Colin 2024). The report argues that the National Lithium Strategy prioritises mining and monetary gain over environmental and social concerns. OLCA claims that:

"The ENL was not built on the basis of broad dialogue processes, which is what it was established would be done, but rather it was born as a political operation with a strong business

and executive power protagonism, while territories, local science and indigenous communities , were not considered" (Colin 2024, 23).

The NGO reports that, unfortunately, local Indigenous people, who are simultaneously the greatest knowledge holders about the local ecosystem, are often deliberately excluded from negotiations with the government or private stakeholders.

Furthermore, the report is highly critical of the environmental consequences of lithium mining. The SQM Company mainly uses brine evaporation, which involves mining lithium with water, leaving the solution in a saline "pool" and waiting 1-1.5 years for water to evaporate and for lithium to become more concentrated. The report calls this an "environmental and social disaster" due to high water losses and, hence, disruption to the way of life of local communities (Colin 2024, 14,24). OLCA has warned of the danger of Chile becoming a "sacrificed zone" for the energy transition, mainly driven by developed economies in the North (Colin 2024, 73).

Another civil organisation, Wetlands International, reinforces this critique by warning that lithium brine extraction poses systemic risks to high Andean wetlands and water cycles (Wetlands International 2023). Wetlands International contests the classification of brine-based lithium as "sustainable," claiming that the long-term impacts on the environment and biodiversity are ignored (Wetlands International 2023, 3–4).

These critiques are echoed in documentary accounts that capture the lived experiences and local perceptions of lithium extraction across Latin America. The documentary "Lithium Rising" by Samuel George followed resource extraction traces through South America's lithium flats, cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and nickel smelters in Indonesia (Samuel George 2024). In the documentary, a Bolivian journalist, Fernando Molina, described how Latin America is "left with broken dreams" after the "tragedy of extraction". Environmentalist Llerco Quezada shared his highly critical perception of extractionism in

Chile: "It is clear that this process will turn Atacama into a swamp in the near future". Llerco argues that the government has constructed an "appearance of consent".

Taken together, the perspectives from NGOs, international scientific organisations, and individuals on the ground share a common vision that starkly contrasts with the narratives put forth by the Chilean government. Rather than portraying lithium extraction as a sustainable path to a developed economy, the civil society emphasises that it represents a continuation of colonial legacies, socio-political exclusion and the promotion of ecological degradation. Their scepticism reveals deep mistrust toward official sustainability claims, which are seen as "greenwashing" language used by the government and the artificial construction of an appearance facade. Civil discourse situates lithium extraction within a broader context of history of exclusion, environmental harm, and elite-dominated decision-making.

Indigenous Perspectives and Epistemologies in Lithium Extraction

Among the Indigenous communities of the Atacama, lithium extraction is widely framed as a multidimensional threat - ecological, political, cultural, and spiritual. Drawing on sources that include direct testimonials from Atacameño leaders and residents, this section explores how lithium mining is understood not simply as economic development but as a violation of the territory's life-sustaining elements.

A recurring theme in Indigenous discourse on lithium mining is framing it as an environmental and spiritual violation of indigenous territory. Indigenous communities are concerned with the destruction of their ecosystem and diminishing freshwater reservoirs. One of Atacama's community members reports that the evaporative extraction of lithium brine methodology uses 200 tons of water to produce one ton of lithium carbonate (Samuel George 2024). Such damaging ways of lithium mining are practised "24 hours a day, 365 days a year"

- an Atacameño leader from the Solcor community stated (Jerez, Garcés, and Torres 2021, 8). The same leader also mentions that local companies "treat it (lithium extraction) as a harmless product that is worth nothing, but it is mineral water, and they are extracting it"(Jerez, Garcés, and Torres 2021, 8).

Water in the Atacama Desert also represents a deeply spiritual commodity. To quote an Atacama farmer from the Toconao community: "Water and land are life. The waters cannot be traded. Water is sacred. It is powerful, it is life, it is our vein, it is our blood …" (Jerez, Garcés, and Torres 2021, 9). The Lickanantay people, also referred to as Atacameños, are the ancestral Indigenous population of the Atacama Desert. They share that water and blood are closely connected in their language and spiritual conception of life. In their language, Ckunza, water is called Puri and is closely connected to the salt flat, which they describe as the heart of their territory. Locals have described lithium extraction as "draining the blood out of the human body and bleeding it out little by little" (D. S. Hernandez and Newell 2022, 958).

Such metaphors and lived experiences show that many Atacameños see their land not as a commodity to be exploited, but as something alive and deeply connected to their community. Rather than reducing the salt flats to projects of extraction, many locals, such as Esperanza, a Lickanantay elder, frame the Atacama salt flats as a site of knowledge. She describes Atacama as a "natural laboratory" and "an open and free university" due to the flats storing origins of life and solutions to ecological crises within (D. Hernandez 2023, 138). However, such spiritual framing is often dismissed and is seen as inferior to the scientific knowledge produced by consultants from large corporations. This marginalisation creates epistemic hierarchies that reinforce colonial power dynamics, positioning Indigenous worldviews as inferior. As such, framing the Atacama as a sacred territory directly opposes dominant narratives that treat it as a sacrifice zone for global energy transitions.

Nevertheless, indigenous knowledge is frequently marginalised. State and corporate actors frequently prioritise technical and scientific expertise, dismissing Indigenous epistemologies as irrational or irrelevant. This dynamic creates epistemic hierarchies, giving legitimacy to foreign interventions and silencing local worldviews.

Despite most locals seeing lithium extraction critically, some see it as necessary due to the urgent need for economic development. For example, some locals describe lithium as a resource that revived local dying-out villages due to the jobs and infrastructure (D. Hernandez 2023, 216). Such differences in perception cause internal divisions in the community. Local leaders warn that financial incentives cause social cohesion and social fragmentation (D. Hernandez 2023, 170).

In summary, Indigenous perspectives on lithium extraction demonstrate that what is frequently referred to as "green" and "sustainable" development can still have a detrimental impact on local communities. Old patterns of inequality are perpetuated when indigenous knowledge is disregarded and their land is considered as a resource to be exploited. Inclusion of marginalized voices in the decision-making processes is essential for a fair green energy transition.

Global Asymmetries and the Green Energy Paradox

From a discursive standpoint, the transformation of extractivism to green extractivism has not dismantled existing power hierarchies. On the contrary, dominant narratives that pose extractivism as the only climate change solution use new sustainability language, legitimising global power asymmetries and making extractivism appear necessary. The solution framing invites critical reflection on how climate urgency is used to justify extraction, without

questioning who benefits and who bears the costs. The global transition from fossil fuels to sustainable energy sources is widely accepted as an inevitable transformation. However, such a transition could introduce new levels of dependencies and inequalities.

Drawing on the themes discussed in the literature, this thesis proposes that green extraction may exacerbate, rather than resolve, structural inequalities. Lithium extraction, especially using the brine evaporation method, is not a labour intensive practice. In particular, this technique involves channeling lithium-rich brine into evaporation ponds, where the natural heat of the desert accelerates concentration without the need for minimal human capital.

Alternatively, when lithium is exported to China - it undergoes various processing which requires much more human labour and an industrialised capacity. Below is a figure that outlines various types of processing that occur in China. Each of these stages adds value and requires skilled labour, advanced technology, and industrial infrastructure, which contributes significantly to job creation and economic growth within China, contrasting to the resource-export model in Chile.

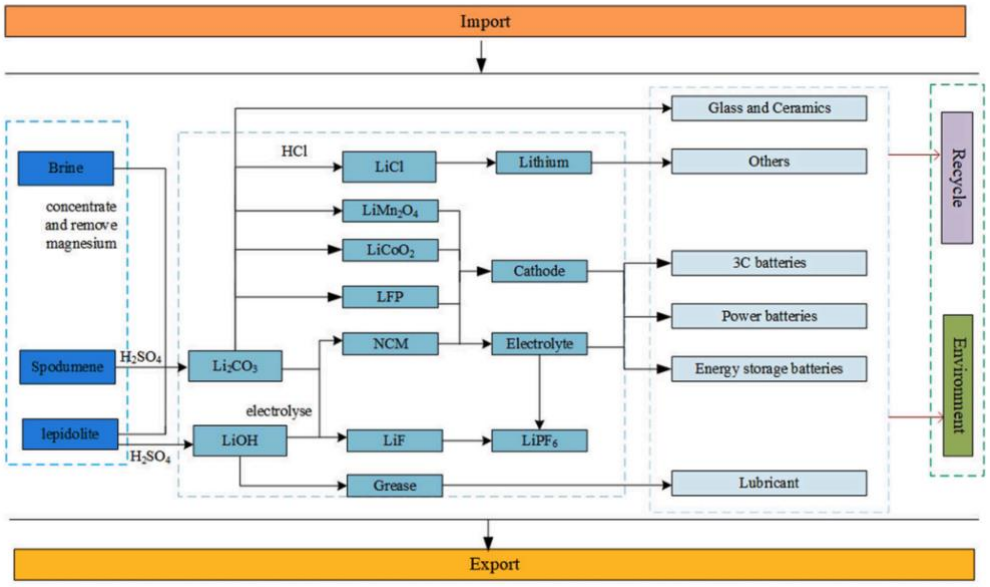

Figure 5: *"Process flow chart of lithium industry in China."*

Source: (Li, Wang, and Chen 2024, 3)

Such structural differences contribute to the economy of both countries differently. This inequality raises questions about how value is distributed across the lithium supply chain.

At the same time, the environmental consequences disproportionately affect regions like the Atacama. The impacts include water depletion, disruption of the ways of living of the local communities and destabilising the ecosystems. According to OECD statistics, Chile is one of the countries with highest risks of wildfires, with 8% of population living in areas of high risk of burning (OECD 2025, 2025, 86). Higher wildfire danger is only recorded in Costa Rica and Australia. Constantly evaporating water in Atacama, the driest desert in the world, is likely to cause significant ecological destruction and pose danger to the vulnerable Chilean population.

Overall, infinite growth of the capitalist system is incompatible with the finite nature of resources. Maristella Svampa describes green extractivism as a "developmentalist illusion", because a resource-based economy is controlled by the demand of the international market creating economic vulnerabilities and because natural resources are finite the projected constant growth projection posed by the capitalist system is unsustainable (Svampa 2019, 14–15). Moreover, at some point the green transformation will not require the same amount of scale and there will be enough of sustainable energy sources such as solar panels. When this stage occurs, Chile is likely to be affected drastically by the drop in demand in minerals, left with depleted ecosystems and diminished leverage in the global economy.

CHAPTER 3: FRAMING CHINA: DEVELOPMENT PARTNER OR GREEN NEOCOLONIALIST?

In the recent decade China has been becoming an increasingly more vital partner in the extractionist industries of Latin America. Chinese involvement in the mining sector is framed by the official political discourse as a development cooperation or a strategic partner. Nevertheless, indigenous communities and the civil society of Atacama express counter narratives, painting a more complex picture. This chapter explores how Chinese involvement is framed across various actor groups such as state institutions, Indigenous groups, NGOs, and the Chinese diplomatic presence itself. The aim is to explore what the narratives expose about the nature of asymmetries of power relations and politics of green energy transition.

China as Strategic Partner

Within Chile, Argentina and Brazil, the official framing around China has been around the concepts of cooperation, mutual benefit, and strategic re-positioning. This favourable portrayal is closely tied to China's commodities super cycle, a period between 2004 and 2014 when the global demand and prices rose for resources, played a key role in this framing. As discussed in Chapter two the current government of Chile frames China as a developmental partner central to economic development and gaining global relevance. A more nuanced perspective, such as that proposed by Rodrigo Álvarez Valdés, acknowledges China's increasing geopolitical and economic influence in Latin America, while also arguing that this influence is in alignment with the needs of the local area. Álvarez frames China's role as indicating of a collaborative, rather than an exploitative approach (Álvarez Valdés 2017).

Supporting this view, Álvarez cites a speech by Alicia Barcena, the Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) between 2008 and 2022, who referred to China as “trusted friends”, emphasizing the “mutual political trust” and “favorable trend of omnidirectional, wide-ranging and multi-level development” characterizing relations between China and South America (Álvarez Valdés 2017, 299,301).

However, despite the emphasis on partnership in these official and semi-official narratives, some of the resources emphasise that the relationship between Chile and China is not as straightforward as it appears in official statements. An article from the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) highlights that:

“Athough the official discourse of political and diplomatic elites manifests positive perceptions, there is also a non-official discourse. Here, the perceptions of the same elites are permeated by mistrust and fear towards China, due to the disparity in capabilities and accentuated asymmetry in multiple fields (geopolitical, diplomatic, political, economic, etc.)”. (Fernández 2021, cited by Fernández 2022)

This tension reveals a dual discourse: one that publicly endorses China as a partner while privately contending with the implications of structural inequality and dependency. These perspectives collectively demonstrate the complex nature of Latin America's interaction with China, which is characterised by strategic alignment and underlying concern.

Green Neocolonialism and Asymmetrical Power

Chilean civil society groups like OLCA and Defensa Ambiental often use framing of Chinese involvement in mining as a form of green neocolonialism. These narratives expose

how so called “sustainable” projects can lead to destruction of the environment, cultural erasure and harmful practices in areas that were already significantly negatively affected by mining.

There are projects promoted by Chinese capital, like the Rucalhue hydroelectric project, which also has been justified through sustainability claims and playing a role in green energy transition. Locals describe it as “Pascua Lama 2.0", equating it to a project from the past that was based on gold and copper extraction ending up damaging glaciers and water resources, because it overlooked local consent, and violated international agreements like ILO 169 (Arroyo Olea 2025). Civil society frequently pointed out that the deals between China and Chile often lack transparency and through that, the investors avoid accountability. Terms like "territorial plunder" are used to describe Chinese involvement (Arroyo Olea 2025). The Rucalhue project caused tensions between the indigenous Mapuche-Pehuenche communities and the Chinese Embassy (El Ciudadano 2025). Locals protested against the violation of their sacred territory, harming biodiversity, and disrespecting their spiritual belief. They “denounced the State for the installation of a fourth dam on the Biobío River, affecting medicinal trees, violating international agreements, and endangering their spirituality, ecosystem, and fundamental rights” (El Ciudadano 2025). As a result, members of the Mapuche-Pehuenche community delivered a letter of complaints directly to the Chinese Embassy.

The narratives put forth by the civil society do not explicitly frame China as an exploitative power, but rather frame it as a participant in a broader system of extractivism and capitalism. It is evident that projects financed by Chinese investment have caused damage to local communities and ecosystems, despite the fact that direct public criticism of China was difficult to found online. This lack of explicit critique in public discourse is particularly interesting, as academic voices continue to be consistently critical. The absence of explicit

scrutiny of China's involvement in these developments by local actors, despite their access to NGOs and other platforms is noteworthy of further research.

CONCLUSION

This thesis intended to investigate how various actor groups from Chile framed lithium extraction and to what extent these narratives reflected global power asymmetries within the sustainable energy transition. By analysing discourse from the government, civil society, and indigenous people, this research has presented evidence for framing lithium as a development opportunity. Contrasting narratives that reveal deeper environmental injustices and structural inequalities.

The government of Chile predominantly framed extractivism as a unique pathway to achieve national economic development, global relevance, and gain control over Chile's natural resources. The National Lithium Strategy positions Chile not as an exporter that is dependent on the international market, but as an equal partner that plays a significant role in efforts to aid countries in combating climate change. Such framing heavily relies on developmentalist language, portraying lithium as a resource that will help Chile increase its standing in the global value chain and stop relying heavily on extractionism as the sole most significant contributor to the national economy. Economic ties with China are portrayed as part of a shared South-South developmental vision.

Developmental narratives are contested by civil society. Non-governmental organisations such as OLCA challenge the developmentalist vision by exposing the consequences of extractivism on the environment and local communities. Civil actors argue that using green language serves to diffuse the extent of the harm that lithium mining brings. The concept of greenwashing is central to the critique, showing how sustainability language is used as a tool to legitimise practices that perpetuate inequalities and exploitation. These actors

warn that Chile will become a “sacrifice zone” while serving the needs of industrialised countries, bearing ecological damage and social exclusion.

Indigenous voices problematise the issues brought forth by extractionism even further. For the people of the Atacameño region, lithium extraction is not just an ecological disaster affecting their land and water. Extraction poses damage to culture, spirituality, and life itself. Water is perceived as a sacred part of life, which is incompatible with the worldviews of corporate structures. Furthermore, Indigenous knowledge systems tend to be dismissed due to the perceived lack of technical expertise, which reinforces epistemic hierarchies stemming from history and colonial power relations. These testimonies expose how extractive projects reinforce asymmetries in whose voices are heard and whose get left out.

What emerges from the public discourse is that the green energy transition, in the form that it is executed now, reproduces global asymmetries rather than resolving them. Sustainability is often framed in ways that serve powerful actors while downplaying the concerns of those most affected. Unfortunately, due to the pressing need for an energy transition, the language urging for a climate solution provides legitimacy to extractivism.

This thesis did not aim to provide an objective representation of reality or a conclusion about whether lithium extraction is harmful or not. Instead, it emphasises the construction of meaning in discourse, the production of legitimacy, and the influence of narratives on perceptions of justice, development, and sustainability.

In conclusion, the discussion regarding China's involvement in lithium extraction in Chile demonstrates that despite its importance, the green transition is not inherently just. Its narratives frequently obscure more than they disclose, and its benefits and burdens are distributed unequally. Acknowledging these asymmetries is imperative in order to envision an energy transition that is not only equitable but also ecologically conscious.

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