

The (BR)IC Way: An Alternative Path to Development?

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Abstract

This review article assesses two books against the background of the question of whether China and India as emerging economies provide a development 'alternative'. The double meaning of this refers to, first, their own experience of recent rapid growth and the chances of replicating this development elsewhere. Second, it points to the external development assistance policies of the BRICs towards the global South and their impact on development thinking and practice.

Keywords

BRICs, development, development aid, China, India, micro-politics

Xiaoming Huang, Alexander C. Tan and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (eds), *China, India and the End of Development Models* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2012, 312 pp., £63.00 hbk).

Marcus Power, Giles Mohan and May Tan-Mullins, *China's Resource Diplomacy in Africa. Powering Development?* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2012, 352 pp., £60.00 hbk).

A spectre seems to be haunting the development community recently, namely the development success of the BRIC states and their arrival at the international development scene as so-called 'emerging donors'. While most of the attention is focused on China's role in global development, other candidates from the BRIC (alternatively the BRICS, BRICSA or BRIICS¹) camp and their developmental impact are occasionally assessed as

1. The original term BRIC refers to the sample of emerging economies lumped together by Goldman Sachs in the mid-2000s: Brazil, Russia, India and China. BRICS (or BRICSA) includes South

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well.² However, behind this fashionable wave of scholarly interest lies a deeper concern. The question is arguably not so much whether emerging regional powers will have an impact on global development policy-making; rather, the core concern is whether they are able and willing to offer truly *alternative* models for and solutions to the enduring *problématique* of (under- or mal-)development.

Offering alternative routes to development may take two different meanings in this regard. One is related to ‘offering an alternative by example’, demonstrating that the paths chosen by an economically successful newcomer may serve as a template for other developing countries. This is true especially if the respective developmental successes seem to diverge from the standard developmental toolkit of the World Bank or the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The other meaning of providing ‘an alternative’ stresses the very impact of the development assistance policies of the BRICs around the globe. Here, the focus is both on the posturing and policies applied vis-à-vis developing countries as well as on the indirect ramifications of such practices on the development strategies of the established, traditional donors.

Both books under review contribute to a critical evaluation of such claims, albeit in very different ways. They share a focus on China (and Chinese domestic as well as foreign policies) with Huang et al. additionally comparing and contrasting China’s experience of rapid economic growth with that of India. Moreover, the contributors to Huang et al. are preoccupied with the question of what can be taken from China’s and India’s own experiences in terms of providing a developmental template for others. In contrast, the book by Power et al. concentrates on the external dimension of surging BRIC power in global development. Emblematic of their endeavour is the subtitle to their analysis of China’s resource diplomacy in Africa: is it indeed ‘powering development’?

China, India, and the End of Development Models by Huang, Tan and Bandyopadhyay presents a collection of essays clustered around the question of whether the recent rapid economic growth in China and India constitutes a new, unique model of modern economic development. This is a perhaps somewhat surprising question regarding BRIC ascendancy given the fact that both economies and societies are fundamentally different, even from a layman’s perspective. And indeed, all the authors who draw comparisons between the two cases – seven of the ten substantive chapters (not including the introduction and conclusion) are comparative in nature – point to the marked differences between the two countries, their internal configurations and historical trajectories. Arguably, then, it could have been expected from the very beginning that comparing both emerging

Africa, as evidenced by the accession of South Africa to the institutional forum of the same name in 2010. Other acronyms abound depending on which countries are included or not for whatever reason – BRIICS, for instance, includes Indonesia as another economic powerhouse in South-East Asia. Some authors have even argued that it is time to move ‘beyond the BRICs’ and to look for yet another set of emerging countries on the global development scene, such as South Korea and Turkey; see on that, for example, Matthias vom Hau, James Scott and David Hulme, ‘Beyond the BRICs: Alternative Strategies of Influence in the Global Politics of Development’, *European Journal of Development Research* 24 (2012): 187–204.

2. See on that, for example, the recent special issue of the *Cambridge Review on International Affairs* 25, no. 4 (2012).

powerhouses would hardly lead to *one* new development model, even one that is broadly formulated.

On the other hand, as the editors conclude at the very end of the book, evidence from the two experiences seems to be ‘not consistent in supporting popular development models’ (see book cover) in general. However, this is only true if one is to search for a single Sino-Indian development model. Several (at least a third) of the contributions follow the advice of the introduction and use the concept of the (East Asian) ‘developmental state’ and largely confirm its applicability to the case of China. In contrast, this model – still popular in academic circles – is rather ill-suited for explaining India’s recent growth and development episodes. More than a decade ago, Ronald Herring referred to India as a ‘dramatic case of a *failed* developmental state’,³ given its historical lack of institutional autonomy from societal pressures and its more recent turn away from state-led planning and towards liberalisation. There are hardly any signs that things have taken a turn since then. This, however, does not negate the ‘developmental state’ model’s explanatory power for other cases, especially the Chinese, as several contributions in the book demonstrate.

Framing the comparison between China’s and India’s development during recent decades by resorting to the question of whether there is one *grand* model hence might not be the most promising avenue of inquiry to begin with. Similarly, the whole discussion concerning models and appropriate modelling is uneven throughout the book. While the first chapters work with fairly conventional growth models taken from mainstream economics, others resort to institutional explanations or, as previously mentioned, hint at the usefulness of the ‘developmental state’ model for assessing China’s economic rise. In the end, the notion of sustainability and concomitant models are introduced only to give way to a plea for scrapping the whole search for (prescriptive) models in favour of ‘living wisdom’. On this basis, the conclusion states (pp. 265–6) that

we have no single model developed from the growth experiences of China and India ... the forms and substance of their economic growth and development are so peculiar ... that any attempt to capture them in the form of a ‘model’ would do injustice to the growth experiences themselves.

This claim, however, only seems to confirm what could have been expected from the start, given China’s and India’s remarkably different political structures as well as institutional and societal configurations. Moreover, that evidence from both cases points in different directions also serves as a reminder that, generally speaking, single one-size-fits-all models are not appropriate in global development. This holds even if important international institutions still operate, at least tacitly, on the premises of such ‘covering models’. A different picture emerges if one applies or designs different models to account for China’s as well as India’s development trajectories *separately*. Hence, the problem is not modelling in itself but careful differentiation between different ideal-type cases and the models derived.

If one is to leave the ‘model issue’ aside, which somewhat obscures the real strengths of the book, a collection of mostly remarkable and illuminating essays surfaces. In particular,

3. See Ronald J. Herring, ‘Embedded Particularism: India’s Failed Developmental State’, in *The Developmental State*, ed. Meredith Woo-Cumings (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 306–34, my added emphasis.

the chapters in the middle of the book that take a decidedly comparative perspective offer the reader a lot. They provide interesting yet contrasting views of both countries' internal development trajectories, their underlying dynamics and eventual ramifications. Guang's comparison of forms of social unrest in the wake of forced land seizures/expulsions in India and China is revealing in that respect. Superficially, it seems that in both instances public development projects resulted in popular opposition and violence. However, the dynamics behind the uprisings differ markedly in light of the widely differing land-tenure systems and structures of political articulation (party competition vs. central–local administrative rivalry). Bo's comparison of growth rates and regime type variables presents a lucid, data-rich and statistically informed contribution to the debate on the impact of structures of decision-making on the level and speed of economic development. The chapters on educational systems (Kumar and Liu) and labour mobility (Young) also derive profound insights from actually comparing both countries. According to their research, different modes of social organisation, such as residency schemes which allow for forms of targeted migration, and differing educational attainment patterns might account for varying development pathways. What all these chapters highlight is that one can hardly understand the ascendancy of the BRICs and assess any likely future developments without paying attention to the multiple differences between countries lumped together by a handy acronym. This is most probably the key asset of the book. In its finest (truly comparative) parts, it not only makes the reader aware of the hugely unequal development trajectories of China and India, but also offers a plethora of relevant information and background knowledge on two widely differing recent development experiences. In this sense, the volume quite convincingly negates the idea that the BRIC states are one monolithic entity.

Since the whole book exhibits a slight China bias (regrettably some chapters do not discuss India in parallel or devote much more space to China), experts on India should feel invited to contribute more to the debate in the near future. This is obvious with regard to such issues as the at least implicit praise of the authoritarian-leaning 'developmental state' model (as opposed to India's democracy). Moreover, one must not reduce the issue of development to analysing just GDP growth rates, as Gilley demonstrates in his contribution to the volume. Even though he only hints at this, it might be interesting to discuss more profoundly the impact of varying political and institutional structures on making development more ecologically sustainable. Here, an in-depth comparison of how India and China fare compared to each other regarding sustainability might be a promising avenue of future research.⁴

China's Resource Diplomacy in Africa: Powering Development? by Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins strives to give a comprehensive and critical overview of both Chinese activism towards Africa as well as the reception of the most recent Chinese interest in Africa throughout the Western world. In order to contextualise Chinese–African relations, the authors provide a framework they call 'postcolonial geopolitical economy', which is more of a catchphrase than a clearly defined concept or research approach. It is an attempt, in their words, to include material as well as cultural dynamics and their interrelations against the

4. See on that, for example, Jingjing Liu, Sam Geall and Sony Pellissery, eds, *Encyclopedia of Sustainability, Volume 7 China, India, and East and Southeast Asia: Assessing Sustainability* (Great Barrington, MA: Berkshire Publishing, 2012). For an early assessment, see Yuefen Li and Bin Zhang, 'Development Path of China and India and the Challenges for Their Sustainable Growth', UNU-WIDER Research Paper 2008/37.

background of both geopolitical and developmental thinking. And indeed the book chooses a somewhat eclectic and perspective-shifting take on the matters addressed. This is only appropriate in view of the huge list of questions to be answered and tasks to be accomplished which the authors present at the outset (pp. 9–10). According to this list, the authors wish to locate China–Africa relations within the framework of geopolitical power shifts; they want to focus on the extensive history of these relations, to assess how China’s internal reforms have spurred her recent external ambitions, to go beyond a state-centred view in order to account for the micro-politics of China–Africa encounters, and they want to analyse how Chinese activism has impacted domestic African politics.

This is an impressive task list, and for the most part their book delivers well on almost all counts. I will, however, take yet another question raised by the authors as my yardstick for assessing the particular strengths of the book. It should not be by chance that Power et al. themselves have chosen the issue of development as a subtitle to their book. And indeed, the question of whether Chinese activities and policies translate into development on the ground in Africa is of paramount interest to them.

Not surprisingly, given the authors’ preoccupation with the developmental impact of Chinese external activities throughout the African continent, it is the aid chapter (Chapter 5) which is one of the strongest and most illuminating. Although they mostly report on what others in Development or China Studies have already compiled in terms of knowledge on the Chinese foreign aid system, their accomplishment is immense. In roughly 30 pages one gets a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the many forms, actors, institutions, ways and workings of the complex aid system that has been established by the Chinese state. Especially laudable is a strong focus on the institutional setting as well as the politics (struggles) within this system. It roughly conforms to the idea of a ‘fragmented authoritarianism’⁵ as a valid depiction of the Chinese policy process. Hence, contrary to widely shared public perceptions, it is unduly simplifying to speak of ‘the Chinese government’ or ‘the Communist Party’ as homogeneous entities acting as one. In contrast, as the authors assert and demonstrate, divergent interests intermingle in Chinese foreign policy decision-making, and actors at times compete with each other or follow their own agendas (a theme which also surfaces in Chapter 8 where the whole foreign policy machinery is discussed).

A second strength of the book is its focus on what Power et al. label the ‘micro-politics’ of various Chinese–African encounters. In an ethnographic fashion, the authors report here and there on their fieldwork in several African sites (e.g. Angola and Ghana). There they have observed communities, the dynamics of in- and exclusion and the nature of the social relations in general that have formed alongside Chinese development as well as entrepreneurial projects. Looking for burgeoning relationships and their impact on development chances in rather concrete situations is both laudable and promising.⁶ In going beyond – or rather deeper than – abstract notions of state-to-state relationships and official

5. See the discussion in Andrew Mertha, ‘Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0’, *China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995–1012.

6. See, for example, Gregor Dobler, ‘Chinese Shops and the Formation of a Chinese Expatriate Community in Namibia’, *China Quarterly* 199 (2009): 707–27; programmatically, Daniel Large, ‘Beyond “Dragon in the Bush”: The Study of China–Africa Relations’, *African Affairs* 107, no. 426 (2008): 45–61.

policy documents, rhetoric or datasets, this line of inquiry asks what happens to ordinary people in real circumstances.

In terms of a development impact, therefore, it might be crucial to ask what exactly people on the ground experience, be they subject to a grandiose development scheme or simply belonging to a community where the economic conditions change because of petty entrepreneurs migrating. Notions of Chinese enclaves in Africa, racism and protest belong to the picture, as the authors make clear. Regrettably, the authors have decided to scatter their ethnographic accounts across the book, sometimes almost burying them under their reporting of secondary literature. One would have wished that a far more prominent place had been assigned to these parts, and perhaps also more space given to them than to the more general analysis. A third particular strength of the book is that it is illustrated with two dozen photographs and reprints of official Chinese propaganda material. This works quite nicely and emphatically underlines the respective arguments made in the text by lending the pure reasoning an aesthetical edge.

In sum, the book offers a nuanced, differentiated and balanced account of the (eventual) development impact of China – her state enterprises, elites, petty entrepreneurs, migrants, etc. – in Africa. Rather than coming down on either the positive (overblown ideas of South–South solidarity) or negative (rogue aid) side of evaluating such impacts, it provides the reader with an impressive array of tools, ideas, concepts and questions on which to build future research. It also calls into question the notion of Africans as mere objects open to outside interference. Here, the ethnographic turn towards concrete social constellations taken by the authors works as a productive device.

As enlightening and highly recommendable as the book may be in general, there are some shortcomings. One criticism, as already hinted, is that the authors' own (field)work is mentioned only sparingly and in snippets. Instead, there is extensive reporting on what others have said (e.g. Bräutigam and Snow), sometimes to the detriment of the presentation of the author's own arguments and insights. Secondly, there is a certain patchwork quality to the book which occasionally hinders the development of a coherent argument. Moreover, some new concepts are introduced ad hoc (such as Harvey's 'neoliberalism' or Nye's 'soft power') without much use being made of them later on. Furthermore, some paragraphs are redundant; in a few instances they are even reiterated literally just a few pages later. Here, more rigorous editing would have been beneficial. Lastly, for a book published in 2012, some of the data and observations reported look a bit dated. What happened to the places after 2008/9 when the fieldwork was done? Did the development project funded by the French in northern Ghana and executed by a Chinese (!) firm a few years ago work smoothly? Has the Special Economic Zone planned in the mid-2000s been established since then? Such questions pop up and are left unanswered in the book.

To come back to the initial question: are there *alternative* development models offered by the newly emerging economies (both in terms of development templates for others as well as subversive development assistance policies)? Both books make inroads and substantive contributions to the scholarly as well as the wider public debate, but they arrive at rather cautious conclusions.

It appears that it is in the field of Chinese development assistance that, if at all, the clearest case for a somewhat alternative development model emerges. China treats the issue of conditionality differently, with no attention to 'good governance' criteria, but not without

any conditionality (e.g. diplomatic recognition). China's strong focus on resources and infrastructure projects might generate investment, government income and occasionally even jobs quickly compared to the often protracted development assistance disbursements on behalf of DAC donors. The long-term developmental legacy of this 'only doing business' approach might be more contested, however. China has also installed a complex system of loans, grants and investments that might, at times, transfer more money to 'aid takers' than DAC members would be willing to donate. Lastly, China is uniquely able, compared to more traditional donors, to frame its efforts in terms of South–South solidarity, equality and non-interference, a point underlined impressively by the narrative in Power et al. Indirectly, China's (and India's) economic success in recent years might also attract developing countries in search of development strategies that work. The assumed model-like qualities of the (BR)IC cases have arguably led to a slight reorientation of some countries in the global South away from traditional donors (in their capacity as development partners as well as role models).⁷ Yet, to date, a BRIC development policy transfer in the truest sense has not happened. And there are reasons for this.

First, the development success of China and India (but also Brazil) might not be replicable at all simply because it is grounded in very peculiar conditions which do not apply elsewhere.⁸ Hence, if anything, selective policies and partial strategies might be transferable. Whether, in turn, the BRIC's external development assistance practices are heavily influenced by domestic experiences might be answerable only in the decade to come. One prominent site to look at in this regard is the recently agreed-upon BRICS Development Bank. In the event that the lending practices of this bank, when it is established and running, diverge substantially from those of the World Bank and other traditional regional development banks, it could be worth analysing whether there is indeed an *alternative* way of doing things modelled after a country's own experiences.

Second, such an alternative way to development in terms of replication might not be desired based on normative reasons. If one is to take seriously that China has outperformed India on many economic fronts, one could reasonably argue that this was due to the autocratic qualities of its developmental state. Yet, the ability to govern, to steer and to push through with reforms need not translate, to say the least, into inclusive and participatory politics. If the key ingredient of a 'developmental state' is its insulation from public and political pressure, then responsiveness to societal demands is not high on the agenda. This, however, might be troubling not only for any aspiration towards democratic decision-making. As both books under review demonstrate, development-related conflicts within society and environmental degradation, to name just two prominent examples, may be suppressed by an authoritarian-leaning developmental state for some time. However, they loom on the horizon and endanger socio-economic development in the long run as they burden people in the short run.

Trickier is the question of whether the BRIC's external development policies might present an alternative to established development-aid thinking. Much talk of the supposedly 'rogue aid' given by the Chinese seems to be inspired by a naive and overly optimistic

7. But see, on the attractiveness and the question of the transferability of the 'China model', Suisheng Zhao, 'The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (2010): 419–36.

8. Stiglitz has exemplified this in the case of China; see Joseph Stiglitz, 'China: Towards a New Model of Economic Development', *China Economic Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008): 33–52.

perspective on the established DAC donor practices. There is no need to refer to the continuing prominence of tied aid and the selective application of good governance criteria in Western development assistance. The simple thought experiment to recalculate Chinese financial flows towards the South according to DAC criteria and then to assess the net resource transfer⁹ shows that China is investing heavily in external development. On the other hand, a lot of Chinese development strategies and practices applied on the ground look remarkably similar to those of the West: the tying of aid money, a focus on infrastructure projects, and not least a comparatively low ratio of domestic employees working for Chinese firms in development-related projects, as the research by Power et al. demonstrates. However, what might be true for Chinese foreign aid in particular may not necessarily hold for other BRIC states.¹⁰

Third, the very developmental success of the BRICs might be at stake; recently, signs of a slowdown in growth, investment drains, dramatic currency fluctuations and social upheaval across India and Brazil, and sometimes even in China, have made the headlines. The development poster children of late may be experiencing the precursors to what Eichengreen and colleagues once labelled the ‘middle income trap’.¹¹ And here again both books, and especially the one by Huang et al., can be a useful resource for thinking about the sustainability of the Chinese and the Indian way of development, respectively. Will civic disobedience in China intensify or decrease as a consequence of rising GDP? How will the developmental state respond? Will ongoing leadership change in India further spur class and religious conflicts, hampering broad and inclusive development in the long run? How do both countries externalise domestic demands? Is there a particular ‘Chinese way’ of development assistance which will inspire the formation of alternative development institutions? These issues are addressed in both books under review and will undoubtedly guide the further debate on BRICs as development actors.

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9. See the excellent piece by Deborah Bräutigam, ‘Aid “with Chinese Characteristics”: Chinese Foreign Aid and Development Finance Meet the OECD-DAC Aid Regime’, *Journal of International Development* 23, no. 5 (2011): 752–64.
10. A case in point is Brazilian foreign aid; see, for example, Dana de la Fontaine and Jurek Seifert, ‘The Role of South–South Cooperation in Present Brazilian Foreign Policy’, *Stockholm Papers in Latin American Studies*, 1/2010; Cristina Y.A. Inoue and Alcides Costa Vaz, ‘Brazil as “Southern Donor”: Beyond Hierarchy and National Interests in Development Cooperation?’, *Cambridge Review in International Affairs* 25, no. 4 (2012): 507–34.
11. Barry Eichengreen, Donghyun Pak and Kwanho Shin, ‘When Fast Growing Economies Slow Down: International Evidence and Implications for China’, NBER Working Paper 16919/2011.