

Development, Chinese Style

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The People's Republic of China today has fully endorsed the rhetoric of development as expressed by the UN, World Bank, and other development agencies. This rhetoric includes openness to world markets, response to profit incentives, encouragement of foreign investment, promotion of infrastructural investment, alleviation of poverty, and sustainability. By endorsing these policies, the PRC leadership promotes China's active presence in international institutions. In this context, China is a nation state like all the others, and the prescriptions designed for other developing countries can be applied equally well there. Conversely, China portrays itself as a model for others in its rapid and cooperative response to developmental issues shared by the rest of the world.

As one example, we may look at the Preface to the *Priority Programme for China's Agenda 21*, produced in response to the Rio Conference on the environment in 1992:

“Under the leadership of the State Planning Commission and the State Science and Technology Commission, revision of the Priority Programme for China's Agenda 21 has been completed after one year's effort. The programme demonstrates China's resolve

to honour its pledge, offered at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, to implement its strategies for sustainable development. The Chinese government hopes that this commitment will inspire the international community to cooperate enthusiastically in a much wider field, in the pursuit of sustainable development in China, in the Asian Pacific region and across our globe.”¹

In the pre-reform era, the PRC advocated a very different kind of developmentalist ideology. For a short time, at the Bandung conference of 1955, for example, China presented itself as a leader of the developing world, and many Indian intellectuals looked to China as an example of successful development, but from the 1960s on, China increasingly went its own way, in its own eyes and in the eyes of the rest of the world. Its command economy, virtual isolation from the rest of the world, and mass mobilization of peasant and urban populations under Communist Party leadership, highlighted China’s difference from the rest of the world. The PRC relied on the unique features of China: its large population, large land mass, and powerful party apparatus, not the ones it shared with the underdeveloped world.

To the extent that China now embraces a common global developmental discourse, we should be able to compare it with the experience of other developing countries. Since the 1950s, at least, Latin Americans, South Asians, and Africans have endorsed programs of rapid economic and technical change with the support of international institutions. At the same time, a critical analysis has emerged that attacks

¹ Administrative Centre for China’s Agenda 21, *Priority Programme for China’s Agenda 21 (Revised version)*, Beijing, 1996, Introduction.

the premises on which this discourse was based.² The critics come from many different perspectives, but they generally agree that the dominant developmental discourse shared these features:

- Orientalism: a view of the traditional non-Western world as stagnant and backward, combined with a Eurocentric claim to universal knowledge derived from particular conditions of Western historical experience;
- Scientism: an uncritical faith in science and technology as objective, apolitical solutions to poverty, accompanied by an empirical stance that put the developmental advisor or official at a distance from the subjects he claimed to be helping.
- Evolutionism: a linear view of history moving upward smoothly from backwardness to modernity.
- Territorial essentialism: The assumption that the appropriate unit of analysis and policy was the single nation state isolated from the world, ignoring transnational flows of capital, labor, and culture. This assumption gave a privileged position to the nationalist elites of new states after the end of decolonization.

² For example, Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard, *International development and the social sciences : essays on the history and politics of knowledge* (Berkeley, 1997); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering development : the making and unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, N.J., 1995); James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine : "development," depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Sheila Jasanoff, "New Modernities: Reimagining Science, Technology, and Development," (unpub. Ms. 2003); Wolfgang Sachs, *The development dictionary : a guide to knowledge as power* (London, 1992).

The result was a “messianic” belief that all countries could progress along the same track as the successful industrialized West given the necessary supplies of capital, education, and technology.

The critics advocate as alternatives:

1. Respect for indigenous knowledge, alternative modernities, different paradigms of growth;
2. Examination of specific local settings, respecting historical and geographical contingencies;
3. Questioning nation-state units, putting each region in global context, focusing on cross-border flows of culture, labor, and capital;

Other critics go farther, questioning the viability of the entire scientific-technological project encapsulated as “modernity.”³

I can only give a few examples of the components of this critique. Arturo Escobar asks why the “dream ... turned into a nightmare. For instead of the kingdom of abundance promised by theorists and politicians in the 1950s, the discourse and strategy of development produced its opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression.”⁴ He blames mainly the “objectivist and empiricist stand that dictates that the Third World and its people exist ‘out there,’ to be known

³ Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Stephen A. Marglin, *Dominating knowledge : development, culture, and resistance*, (Oxford, 1990); Ashis Nandy, *Science, hegemony and violence : a requiem for modernity* (Delhi, 1988).

⁴ Escobar, *Encountering development*, 4.

through theories and intervened upon from the outside.”⁵ James Ferguson, analyzing the World Bank report on Lesotho, focuses on the pretense of the report that the country was an individual atomic unit, ignoring the very large labor migrations across its borders and the fact that most of its economy was driven by outside forces. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard stress the need to attend to historical specificity, and the misleading assumption that developmental paradigms are easily generalized across diverse peoples and cultures. They also note the implicit evolutionism that survives in developmental discourse in the assumption of motion from less to more advanced culture.⁶ Jasanoff attacks the uncritical faith in science and technology that informs policy analysis.⁷

Each of the principles above implies a particular view of how history changes and how it makes an impact on the present. Orientalism clearly implies a binary contrast between a dynamic West and a stagnant East. This contrast stems at least as far back as Montesquieu, and comes through Hegel to Marx, Smith, Weber, and later theorists.

⁵ Ibid. 8.

⁶ "... It is not clear that a kind of evolutionism -- a desire to make 'traditional' people into something else -- has gone away despite all the criticism such perspectives have received within different social sciences." Cooper and Packard, *International development*, 17.

⁷ "Although [Vannevar] Bush's linear model of technological development has been challenged by later analysts... few in the policy world have taken issue with its core premise: that basic scientific research is the fountainhead from which flow not only growth in knowledge but also technological advances and associated benefits for society. The questions posed by science policy analysts have largely focused on how governments can effectively fulfill their missions with respect to science and technology ... -- not whether they need to rethink at a foundational level the connections between science, technology, and human betterment." Jasanoff, "New Modernities," 6.

Scientism also privileges Europe as the site of the “first” scientific breakthrough (ignoring the role of the non-European world in the scientific revolution), and endorses a simple diffusion model from advanced to less advanced countries. Evolutionism endorses the break away from an unmoving traditional past, but believes that after this break, progress will be smooth and linear. It rejects alternative models of historical change which stress ruptures or cyclical patterns. The territorial essentialist view, characteristic of national history, incorporates both a sharply binary spatial division between those who are and those who are not part of the nation, and a teleology that implies that the nation is part of a process of coming into being. The historian’s role is to trace the appearance of this already existing form, like a negative emerging from an emulsion. As Sheila Jasanoff states, “The very discourse of development continues to deny the relevance of the past; it is the present, as imagined by development agencies, that sets the standards for what needs to be accomplished.”⁸

Nearly all of the developmental discussion of this type, by both advocates and critics, addressed only Latin America, South Asia, and Africa. East Asia produced a different but related type of discourse and critique, under the general rubric of the “East Asian developmental state.” It emerged as a critique of free-market economic development models with the recognition of the success of Japan as an industrializing country in the postwar period, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. This familiar discussion does not need summary here.⁹ I will only mention

⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

⁹ For example, Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (Stanford, 1982); Alice Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* (Oxford, 1989); Alice Amsden, “The

two points: The implications of “development” in East Asia are the same as in the first developmental discourse: rising per capita incomes, industrialization, technological progress, literacy, education, etc., yet, it seems, the two literatures almost never refer to each other. Second, many trace the success of the “little dragons” to the impact of the Japanese colonial empire [which was also responsible for the industrialization of Manchuria]. Some critics of developmental discourse outside East Asia argue that the impact of colonial empires must be taken into consideration when discussing the causes of poverty. (In the case of Latin America, dependency theorists may invoke both the impact of formal Spanish colonialism and the neo-colonialism of the US in the nineteenth century). This implies that a comparative study of colonialism in these regions could help elucidate the causes of development and underdevelopment in both. Yet for the most part, East Asia has remained separate from the discussion of developmental discourse in the rest of the world, and scholars of colonialism have focused only on European empires, particularly those of England, France, and the Netherlands.¹⁰ Therefore I advocate both an extension of the insights of colonial studies to the indigenous empires of East Asia [China and Japan] and an extension of analyses of developmental discourse to include the East Asian experience.

The main questions I have in mind, which are only hypotheses at this point are:

state and Taiwan's economic development,” in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the state back in* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 78-106; Robert Wade, *Governing the Market: Economic Theory and the Role of Government in East Asian Industrialization* (Princeton, 1990).

¹⁰ Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in Bourgeois Worlds* (Berkeley, 1997).

- How well does China's recent experience fit with this critique of developmental ideology? How does this critique inform our understanding of contemporary Chinese development ideology?
- Conversely, and more ambitiously, how would an examination of China alter current understandings of the basic features and practices of developmentalism?

It is easy to argue that China does not fit well. All China specialists know how to make the case for the China difference. It has a long imperial history, unlike the newly formed postwar states; it was never colonized, even if its territorial sovereignty was highly compromised. China's gigantic territorial and demographic scale and its special socialist experience, we usually say, marks it off definitively from the non-socialist decolonized world. Most scholars prefer to call China "post-socialist" rather than "post-colonial."

But now it may be more useful to point out what China shares with the developing world, for two reasons. First, the Chinese elite endorses the gamut of assumptions that reign in global developmental institutions. They at least talk the talk, and send their students abroad to learn it. Secondly, many features characteristic of the "feudal" past have re-emerged in post-reform China after the socialist interlude, and many of these cultural characteristics have analogies outside China. We may cite, for example, patriarchal families, urban guilds, labor contracting, popular religious organizations, marketing networks, household agricultural and rural industrial production, etc. Many of these institutions are found to some extent in India, for example. There is, therefore, an initial basis of similarity from which to begin comparative study.

I agree with Cooper and Packard that examination of specific institutional sites and practices of development is more useful than broad based indictments of “Western modernity” or developmental discourse as a whole. How do we get from the general to the specific? One way is to look at particular projects now endorsed by the PRC, like large scale dam building, or the “Develop the West” project. Large dams are a global practice, found in the U.S., Brazil, and India, for example, and in each country they have generated substantial political debate. Each of the debates drew intentionally or unintentionally on the experience of its predecessor. The U.S. Bureau of the Interior’s plans of the 1930s provided a template for Stalin and his successors. The essential idea of rationalized bigness easily crossed political boundaries.¹¹ During the 1950s, the Soviet Union provided the model and the technical advice for China’s big dam projects. Today, the PRC links the Three Gorges Dam more often to Sun Yatsen’s vision than to that of Stalin.

The latest PRC project, the “Great Opening of the West” (*Xibu Da Kaifa*) advocates the shift of economic investment and settlement from the wealthy coast to the impoverished interior.¹² As Heike Holbig argues, this program gives the central state an opportunity to recapture ideological leadership of China’s economy, after losing its resources and initiative to the provinces since the 1980s. Now, the PRC aims to reinvent

¹¹ Loren Graham, *What Have We Learned about Science and Technology from the Russian Experience?* (Stanford, 1998).

¹² François Godement, ed., *La Chine et son Occident: China and its Western Frontier*, (Paris: Centre Asie Ifri, 2002); David S G Goodman, "China's Campaign to "Open up the West": National, provincial, and local perspectives." Special issue of *The China Quarterly* 178 (2004).

itself as a developmental state. This great program also has its precedents in the U.S., Russia, and other places. Today, some PRC leaders even openly invoke the U.S. frontier settlement of the nineteenth century as a model for their program. This program, however, also has long roots in China's imperial history, going back to Qing projects to incorporate Xinjiang in the eighteenth century. New histories of Xinjiang devote a great deal of attention to the land clearance programs of the Qing as a model of economic development serving to integrate the multiple nationalities of the empire, just as the PRC claims to do today.

As Ann Stoler notes, comparisons have politics.¹³ Simply by noting which models Chinese look to for legitimation or guidance, which elements they stress, and which ones they suppress, we may reveal the less obvious intentions of the proponents of a particular project. Both historical and geographical comparisons highlight some aspects and repress others. Chinese now reject the Soviet model of the command economy, but neglect its still powerful influence today. They do not analyze how the big dams and big industrial enterprises came to be built. Chinese frontier historians seldom mention massacres of native Americans now, nor do they stress revolts of the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang against the Qing state.

A second approach follows the evolution of developmental discourse historically. From the Qing to the Republic to the PRC before and after the Sino-Soviet split and 1980s, China has apparently made radical shifts in its developmental programs. Yet there is an underlying continuity in the goals of all these policies, even if the instruments have

¹³ Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88 (Dec., 2001), 829-885.

changed. Does this make China special? Not necessarily. Sugata Bose, in a historical analysis of Indian developmental ideology, points to constant goals, particularly poverty alleviation and improvement of quality of life, underneath the focus on “instruments” like raising savings rates and attracting investment.¹⁴ He argues that, instead of polarizing Indian developmental debate, for example, between the village localism of Gandhi and the central industrialization model of Nehru, we should pay attention to the multiple possibilities that emerged from the early independence period. An analogous approach to China would look for common themes beneath the contending political ideologies of the past two centuries, giving us a more nuanced appreciation of how the past has been recuperated in the present.

As critics note, developmental ideologies deny history, and China is no different. By “denial” I mean both the rejection of the past as a burden, and the refusal to think historically, to attempt to reflect on how the past is linked to the present. The socialist developmental program rejected the imperial and Republican periods as backward “feudal” institutions, or as transitory “bourgeois” phases; the modern “socialist market economy” program, despite its contradictory name, increasingly invokes the universalist claims of global capitalist development. Both ideologies detached contemporary China’s economic development from the legacy of the past.

But China as a developmental state cannot escape its own history. Despite the shift from an emphasis on difference from the rest of the world to an emphasis on

¹⁴ Sugata Bose, "Instruments and Idioms of Colonial and National Development: India's Historical Experience in Comparative Perspective," in *International development and the social sciences : essays on the history and politics of knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall M. Packard (Berkeley, 1997).

similarity, much continuity remains in developmental policy, going back to the early twentieth century. The Guomindang, too, had its version of state-led developmentalism, expressed in large-scale infrastructure projects and industrial planning. (The idea of the Three Gorges Dam was first outlined by Sun Yatsen). Even though warfare and internal upheaval prevented the realization of many of these programs, the ideals remained, and guided much of the economic program of the Guomindang on Taiwan.¹⁵

But we can trace developmentalism back further, to the Qing dynasty. Many Qing officials supported active involvement in agricultural production so as to improve the welfare of the people. The writings on economic development of Chen Hongmou, an eighteenth-century official who is the subject of a brilliant study by William T. Rowe, display many features that would be recognizable to late Qing reformers, Guomindang planners, and even PRC cadres.¹⁶

Paradoxically, efforts to define China's identity as a nation increasingly invoke the imperial past, even as its economic programs deny its relevance. Just as China comes to look more like the rest of the world, its intellectuals increasingly assert the value of its distinctive past. Historians have pointed to the flourishing markets and expanding commercial reach of the eighteenth century as models for twentieth-century reforms. The search for roots of China's national identity looks back to find those elements that give

¹⁵ William C. Kirby, "Continuity and Change in Modern China: Economic Planning on the Mainland and Taiwan, 1934-58," *Australian Journal of Chinese Studies*, v.24, p. 121-41 (July 1990).

¹⁶ William T. Rowe, *Saving the world: Chen Hongmou and elite consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, 2001).. Reviewed by Peter C. Perdue in *The China Quarterly*, v. 172 (December 2002), 1096-7.

China its unique character: the systematic, continuous bureaucratic state, the active engagement of merchants and peasants in wide-scale market exchange, the expansion of territory by military conquest into Central Eurasia, the harmonization of personal behavior and social order under family-centered moral ideologies. Like other nation-states, China partakes of the duality of nationalism: the claim to unique primordial cultural roots alongside the project of creating a modern state able to compete in the world. The need for authenticity in a globalizing world drives the search for distinctive features of “Chineseness” or “Asianness” in the form of cultural foundations. Prasenjit Duara shows how the Japanese invocation of common Asian civilizational ideals found a response among Chinese redemptive religious societies in Manchuria.¹⁷ Chinese reformers today will never call on the Japan of the 1930s as a model [even though similarities are clear], but they have invoked Meiji Japan alongside Qing China as reference points for modern developmental projects.

A look at policies and attitudes toward the frontiers reveals the paradoxical combination of progressivism and primordialism in nationalist developmental thought. The territorial expansion of China’s empires, viewed historically, exhibits the same paradoxes through a nationalist lens. On the one hand, nationalists must claim that in some sense all the territory of the modern nation-state has ‘always already’ belonged to China. This claim is shared by nearly all nationalists, including the Guomindang and CCP. Sun Yatsen, Zou Rong, and radical nationalists of the 1900s first announced the fetishist claim that “for 5000 years” the frontier lands have been part of China. On the

¹⁷ Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and authenticity : Manchukuo and the East Asian modern* (Lanham, 2003).

other hand, by praising the achievements of the conquering emperors who expanded the empire, particularly Kangxi and Qianlong, historians imply that the newly conquered territories were not always part of the Chinese realm. They want to make the Qing conquests a justification of the modern multinationality state, a “reunification” of the minority peoples under imperial rule. This requires a considerable amount of distortion and selective reading of the historical record, but it cannot remove all contradictions.

Frontier development, then and now, also reveals the hidden contradictions of nationalist cultural and economic claims. The PRC invokes a “civilizing mission” in its approach to the minorities on the frontiers, treating them as backward people who need to be brought into the modern world by the developmental state. On the other hand, it also espouses an ideology of equality and multiculturalism, allowing for independent nationalities to determine their own fate. Nationality policy is based on a form of primordialism, which classifies the fifty-five minorities according to unchanging, essential cultural characteristics. It fixes the flux of history, selectively highlighting specific cultural traits of one time and place while suppressing others. Developmental policy, by contrast, endorses change, driving all the peoples of the nation-state to assimilate to a common standard. From the very beginning of its nationalist ideology in the early twentieth century, Chinese thought has polarized around these alternatives: the need to avoid “Han chauvinism” by respecting non-Han autonomy, and the need to enforce uniform authority over the territory inherited from the Qing empire.

The PRC is a nation-state that inherited most of the territory of an empire, but it is unable to fully acknowledge its imperial past.¹⁸ All the other major empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have disintegrated into their component parts. Only the PRC still tries to hold the pieces together, and to recover the important lost component of Taiwan. The “Develop the West” program is part of a new effort to justify the maintenance of imperial control as part of an economic development program that is supposed to benefit both the Han and the non-Han peoples. Linking this program to earlier ones of frontier development will illustrate how China has attempted to manage the transition from empire to nation-state.

¹⁸ Ross Terrill, *The new Chinese empire - and what it means for the united states* (New York, 2003).

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