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China' s developmental tales in Africa

Book Review

Coevolutionary Pragmatism: Approaches and Impacts of China-Africa Economic Cooperation,
by Xiaoyang Tang, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 278 pages, \$99.99 (Hardcover)

China-Africa and an Economic Transformation, by Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin, eds.,
Oxford University Press, 2019, 368 pages, \$93.00 (Hardcover)

Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia, by Miriam Driessen,
Hong Kong University Press, 2019, 198 pages, \$45.00 (Hardcover)

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China's tremendous achievement in economic growth and transformation is among the few development miracles after World War II. In recent years, burgeoning scholarly discussions and policy debates have arisen over what development opportunities and knowledge China can offer to Africa, the continent with the largest number of developing countries. Aside from the consistent emphasis on political solidarity in China-Africa relations, China-Africa economic cooperation is receiving unprecedented attention with China's "Going Out" strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative. This review article selects three newly published works that reveal developmental tales of China's economic cooperation with Africa.

1 A development "model" with pragmatism

China's economic rise has indeed provided Africa with additional options in terms of goods and capital, but the assertion that China offers an alternative model that is different from the Washington Consensus is dubious. It is worth noting that China has never officially endorsed or elaborated on the so-called Beijing Consensus or China Model. In *Coevolutionary Pragmatism: Approaches and Impacts of China-Africa Economic Cooperation*, Xiaoyang Tang goes beyond this dichotomy to describe China's economic presence in Africa as a "model" with no model, which results from having a different understanding of development. China believes that development should be driven by a target-oriented rather than a model-oriented approach. Contrasted with the linear thinking and inflexible prescriptions of the Washington Consensus to promote economic development in Africa, China's economic cooperation with Africa is targeted at economic growth and structural transformation, and is rooted in a pragmatic process of experiments, trial-and-error, and adaptation, reflecting in particular gradualism and an emphasis on local knowledge.



Drawing on in-depth fieldwork and interviews, *Coevolutionary Pragmatism* aims to demonstrate how concrete practices on the ground have effectively contributed to the structural transformation of China and Africa through advancing socioeconomic co-evolution. The impacts of coevolutionary pragmatism are illustrated in seven areas of China-Africa economic cooperation: trade; infrastructure; agriculture; manufacturing; special economic zones; employment and training; social and environmental responsibility. In Tang's view, the co-evolution of state, market, and society is reflected in China's own development process, as well. His exploration helps us to understand coevolutionary pragmatism as a consistent principle of China, both at home and abroad. Specifically, coevolutionary pragmatism includes three interrelated elements. The first is the unwavering target to promote sustainable economic development. This involves corresponding transformation toward market economy and industrialization. In practice, there are flexible approaches to coordinate multiple aspects and interact with partners during the economic transformation.

To avoid fragmented case-by-case study, Tang summarizes chicken-and-egg dilemmas in different issue areas. In the context of trade, for instance, a dilemma exists between market activeness and regulation. The market will not flourish without strengthening the regulatory capacity, but without an active market, one cannot learn how to regulate effectively. In the area of infrastructure, the chicken-and-egg dilemma is that the market economy requires infrastructure as an enabling condition, but investment in infrastructure cannot generate a good commercial return or be well maintained if the market economy is not yet fully developed. These different chicken-and-egg dilemmas embody a way of thinking with "Chinese dialectics," which is thought-provoking. In contrast to the emphasis on best practices, *Coevolutionary Pragmatism* depicts a coevolutionary picture of spiraling upward. The numerous unexpected challenges that Chinese governments, enterprises, projects, and citizens



encounter in Africa are facilitating changes and adaptation to achieve the compatible goals of different actors.

In its extensive economic cooperation with Africa, China is more of a teammate than a coach. Within the context of a common goal of economic transformation, China tends not to lecture about a certain developmental model in practice, but rather encourages African countries to explore a path of development and formulate policies in light of their own national conditions.

2 China's engagement and African economic transformation

The economic transformation embodied by industrialization and agricultural modernization is a strategic goal for many African countries. The neoliberal policy experiments, however, have failed to do much to achieve this goal. China's industrial upgrading strategies, which reflect changes in its endowment structure, have defied economic prescriptions under the Washington Consensus. In addition to a discussion of China's economic growth and its impact on the global economy, and a general historical discussion of China-Africa relations, *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation* highlights the roles that Chinese actors play in transforming the African economy and further debunks the neocolonial and imperialist myths about China's role in Africa. The volume is edited by Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin and includes chapters by leading experts on China-Africa relations. Many contributors are influential in both academic and policy spheres.

The economic obstacles for African countries to industrialization lie mainly in the lack of appropriate manufacturing investment and the infrastructure to support it. Economic engagement with China may be conducive to overcoming these obstacles.



On one hand, China provides necessary financing, in the form of aid or commercial loans, for infrastructure development in Africa, and participates in constructing Africa infrastructure projects through a variety of means. On the other hand, as wages and costs rise in China, domestic firms can become “leading dragons” by transferring industry chains to Africa and accelerating African structural transformation.

China has indeed contributed to the development of infrastructure in Africa and has established many overseas economic zones in various African countries. However, the anticipation of Chinese manufacturing heading to Africa due to rising domestic costs seems to be overly optimistic. Africa’s institutional flaws and business risks could easily counteract the potential economic benefits for Chinese firms. On top of that, some African manufacturers are afraid that homemade products will be overshadowed by competition from China, although more-nuanced analysis does not support this claim. While African countries have benefited greatly from their engagement with China, they are far from achieving industrialization and structural transformation. In China-Africa economic cooperation, Africa should by no means be seen as a passive recipient. The overall message of this volume is that, because there are fewer opportunities for the continent to undertake industrial development along a trajectory similar to earlier industrializers, African countries need to take a more strategic approach to China-Africa economic ties and build their own capacity to steer the process of economic transformation.

3 In the name of development

Since reform and opening up, China’s development narrative not only shifted its national strategies and policies, but also profoundly changed Chinese people’s understanding of economic development and self-development. The vision of upward

mobility and the hope for securing a better life back in China are pushing ordinary Chinese workers to Africa for opportunities. Ethiopia is one of the African countries most interested in learning from China's developmental path. In *Tales of Hope, Taste of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia*, Miriam Driessen provides a unique window into everyday encounters between Chinese and Ethiopians based on ethnographic observations of a road construction project in Tigray, Ethiopia.

For these road builders coming from afar, Ethiopia is a country that lags behind and desperately needs China's help. Ethiopian workers were assumed to buy into Chinese engineering expertise and ideas about development. These Chinese employers and workers, however, were not met with the response they expected. The expatriate Chinese employers attempted to fashion the Ethiopian laborers into workers who were diligent, humble, and willing to submit to managerial discipline in the name of development for themselves and their society. In daily practices, however, Ethiopian workers tended to gain the upper hand, despite their Chinese employers having more expertise and deciding on their wages and benefits. Focused on improving their labor conditions, Ethiopian workers use a wide range of subversive acts of resistance and protest, from subtle transgressions of company regulations to labor strikes and lawsuits brought to local courts. To the dismay of Chinese entrepreneurs, local courts often sided with the Ethiopian laborers. The Chinese road builders were confused and even disappointed by the apparent ingratitude of Ethiopian workers. In the face of such frustration, Chinese expatriate managers further upheld us/them dualism to justify their decisions, establish their authority, and advance their principles. It is worth noting that the Chinese workers in Ethiopia were internally divided as well, further revealing the heterogeneity of Chinese migrants in Africa.

Similar to Tang (2021), Driessen depicts Chinese employers and workers in Africa as hardworking and "eating bitterness". While *Tales of Hope, Taste of Bitterness*

provides a less rosy picture for expatriate Chinese in Ethiopia, for African laborers, the arrival of a large number of Chinese enterprises and the start of numerous projects greatly strengthens their bargaining position. Local laborers have managed to drive up wage levels themselves, mainly by taking advantage of their labor mobility to demand better contracts. The economic cooperation between China and Ethiopia even gives local authorities more room to maneuver and increases their policy autonomy. This draws a very different picture from the neocolonialism portrayed in some media and by Western political leaders. How a country's economic development can benefit from these new dynamics is, of course, another question.

The books covered in this article represent the latest findings on the approaches, features, and impacts of China-Africa economic cooperation. Many insights in these books use China's own experience of development as a frame of reference and are backed by solid field research. While these works provide many documentary-style scenarios and observations, the overall theorization is somewhat inadequate. The analytical frameworks, theoretical mechanisms, and causal inferences behind these findings are not fully developed. Further studies on China-Africa economic cooperation should focus on the following issues. First, they should examine China-Africa economic cooperation using a comparative perspective, comparing different areas of cooperation, as well as exploring the similarities and differences between China and its European and American counterparts. Second, they should reveal more about the logic behind the behavior of local African elites and governments when dealing with Chinese actors. Finally, they should conduct more rigorous empirical analysis using micro-level data to discover and confirm the theoretical mechanisms.



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