

The Praxis of Development in the Global South

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We live in an interregnum. The neoliberal order that reorganised global production and thought from the 1980s onward has lost its legitimacy, even among its architects. The Washington Consensus – fiscal austerity, trade liberalisation, privatisation, the subordination of the state to market ‘discipline’ – has been repudiated not only by the statistics of stagnation across Africa and Latin America, but by the behaviour of the Global North itself, which now openly pursues industrial policy and protectionism, while forbidding the same to the Global South.

Yet the interregnum is precisely what makes the present moment so dangerous: the old order decays without dying, and the new order cannot yet be born. The Global South finds itself navigating a conjuncture in which the rules of the game are being rewritten by the same powers that wrote them the first time – except now with openly coercive instruments, from ‘reciprocal tariffs’ to new unequal treaties to sanctions and decapitation strikes.

It is against this conjuncture that the four texts in this issue of *Wenhua Zongheng* must be read. Taken together, they form an emerging Chinese contribution to the theory and practice of modernisation in the Global South. The thread that binds them is neither cultural nor ideological in the narrow sense. It is resolutely material: each text is preoccupied with the concrete question of how states build productive capacity, secure the conditions of their own reproduction, and resist subordination to an international order designed for their permanent underdevelopment.

Qin Beichen and Jing Jun’s ‘Constructing a New Development Theory from the Global South’ provides the theoretical scaffolding for the entire issue. The Washington Consensus, they demonstrate, was never merely a set of economic prescriptions; it was an ideological formation that successfully conflated the freedom of capital with freedom itself, delegitimising any state action that threatened the profit margins of multinational corporations while weaponising international institutions – the IMF, the World Bank, and the dispute settlement mechanisms embedded in trade agreements – against the autonomous development strategies of the South. The consequences are documented with precision: premature deindustrialisation across Africa and Latin America, the accumulation of labour in low-productivity service sectors, the hollowing of state capacity, and the foreclosing of the historical path that every currently industrialised economy actually followed. The authors rightly insist that this was not a failure of neoliberalism, but its achievement – the systematic underdevelopment of the peripheral countries is the precondition, not the unfortunate byproduct, of accumulation in the core countries.

What is especially valuable in Qin and Jing’s contribution is their identification of the three structural obstacles confronting post-neoliberal catch-up: digital technology’s labour-saving tendencies in

manufacturing; the oligopolistic grip of multinational corporations over intangible assets (patents, data, brand equity, supply chain protocols); and the intensification of great-power geopolitical competition that compresses the policy space available to Southern governments. These are not separate crises but a unified system of constraint. The task they set for the Global South is accordingly ambitious: not the correction of neoliberal excesses within an existing framework, but the construction of an entirely new theoretical paradigm, rooted in Southern experience, centred on production and employment rather than exchange efficiency, and honest about the constitutive role of the state in any historically successful industrialisation.

It is precisely this theoretical demand – for a grounded, materialised account of how states develop productive forces – that Li Xiang’s ‘China and the Electrification of the Global South: The Case of Pakistan’ attempts to answer at the level of practice. Pakistan is not an abstract case study but a diagnostic site. Here, the colonial inheritance is unusually legible: British infrastructural investment was explicitly designed to connect ports to raw material hinterlands rather than to build an integrated domestic economy. The railways that made British India the world’s fourth-largest railway network were colonial trade corridors, not national development infrastructure. Pakistan inherited this point-to-line logic, including its political consequences – a power grid that concentrates distribution in major cities and military centres while leaving peripheral regions underserved.

What China’s experience and capabilities brings to this situation is not merely electricity, but the material reorganisation of state-society relations. Li Xiang is at his most penetrating when he distinguishes between ‘despotic power’ and ‘infrastructural power’ – the former characterising hierarchical top-down authority, the latter the networked, negotiated penetration of the state through society at the level of the household and the village. Large dams and hydropower stations embody despotic power; grids, and above all, distributed photovoltaics, constitute infrastructural power. The insight that PV panels are now replacing diesel generators in Lahore’s informal settlements, enabling farmers to power irrigation with solar panels, and making grid-independent microgrids available to communities bypassed by formal electricity services, is not a story about clean energy. It is a story about the material expansion of state capacity from below, the extension of the infrastructural reach of the Pakistani state into social spaces that colonialism deliberately left unintegrated.

The strategic lesson here generalises powerfully. The combination of large-scale centralised infrastructure (which concentrates state power and drives industrial demand) with decentralised distributed technology (which democratises access and builds the social fabric of development) offers a two-track model of state capacity building that speaks directly to the fragmented, colonial-inheritance conditions of much of sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Latin America. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is, from this perspective, not merely a bilateral investment relationship but a laboratory for a new mode of South-South development cooperation – one that explicitly aims to strengthen state capacity rather than erode it, as the conditionalities of Northern multilateral lending historically have done.

Feng Chao’s ‘Silk Road Manufacturing: An Alternative Path to Globalisation’ examines a complementary dimension of the same problematic: not the infrastructure of energy but the architecture of industrial production. The Silk Road Manufacturing model that Feng proposes – Chinese firms constructing transnational manufacturing networks in Vietnam through foreign direct investment, technology transfer, and industrial chain integration – is presented as a response to the crisis of deglobalisation and the systematic attempt by the United States to use technological hegemony, intellectual property regimes, and tariff barriers to freeze China’s industrial development. These are not trade measures in any neutral sense. They are instruments of hyper-imperialist containment, designed to prevent the emergence of transnational production

networks that could offer Southern countries an alternative to dependence on Northern corporate value chains.

Feng's most significant contribution is the concept of the 'mobile country of origin' – the idea that Chinese firms can build deeply localised ecosystems in Vietnam (and by extension, across ASEAN and beyond), achieving genuine value-addition, technology transfer, workforce development, and industrial upgrading, rather than simply relocating labour-intensive assembly to exploit tariff arbitrage. The argument is that the BRI can function as a framework for genuine productive integration, one that serves the industrialisation strategies of receiving countries rather than subordinating them to the export demands of the investing country.

The question of whether Chinese industrial expansion in Vietnam and elsewhere replicates the extractive logic of previous waves of foreign investment, or genuinely transfers productive capacity and technological capability to host economies, is precisely the question that distinguishes South-South cooperation from a new variant of dependency. Feng's answer is not conclusive, but the analytical framework he offers – centred on localisation depth, domestic value-addition ratios, workforce development, and the cultivation of locally embedded supply clusters – provides the criteria by which the progressive or regressive character of any specific investment relationship can be evaluated. For movements and governments across the Global South, this is practically valuable.

Finally, Wang Li's review of Qiu Shijie's intellectual biography of Taiwanese economist Liu Shinkei illuminates the historical depth of these debates in unexpected ways. Liu's intellectual trajectory – from Japanese Marxist theories of 'non-transition,' through encounters with dependency theory and world-systems analysis, and ultimately back toward endogenous development theory and economic nationalism – is not merely an episode in the history of ideas. It is a compressed map of the theoretical dilemmas that still confront the Global South. What Wang Li recovers from this trajectory is the productive tension itself: the insistence that understanding any particular economy requires both the rigour of internal class analysis and the honesty about its integration into a structurally unequal world system. Neither endogenism nor world-systemism alone is sufficient. The dialectical synthesis – a theory of how endogenous class forces interact with the structures of global accumulation – remains the unfinished project.

Across all four texts, a convergent argument emerges with increasing clarity. The construction of a new development theory for the Global South requires, simultaneously: a theoretical break from Northern epistemic frameworks that naturalise the subordination of Southern states; the active deployment of state power to develop productive forces, with manufacturing at the centre; the strategic use of South-South cooperation as a vehicle for building state capacity rather than creating new dependency; and the recovery of the intellectual traditions of the Global South itself, as resources for a genuinely Southern theory of development.

The texts assembled here do not offer a complete programme. But they offer the tools for thinking through the problem in its full complexity. Whether the question is the theoretical de-ideologisation of development economics, the relationship between large infrastructure and state capacity, the conditions under which transnational industrial cooperation serves or undermines host-country development, or the long history of Marxist engagement with the problem of late development – the contributors to this issue are engaged in the construction of a theoretical commons that belongs, by right of experience and necessity, to the Global South.

