



# Introduction to the Special Issue: Strategic Deployment of the China Model in Africa

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*This introductory article examines the concept of strategic localization, which is central to the theme of this Special Issue of Politics & Policy. We focus on how African states, for regime survival and/or pragmatic reasons, reinterpret China's development discourse and preferences and implement them in their local contexts. We hypothesize that the China model of development has become a rhetorical commonplace used to legitimize policies perceived to be: (1) better for regime survival (e.g., no political conditionalities; dissemination of resources to elites); and (2) superior to other development models (more suitable for developing countries, better at developing strong states). The article will also give a synopsis of the other articles in the Special Issue—highlighting their main arguments and findings.*

**Keywords:** China Model, Special Issue, Africa, China-Africa, Strategic Localization, Regime Survival, China's Development Discourse, Development Models.

**Related Articles (in this Special Issue):**

Åberg, John H. S., and Derick Becker. 2020. "China as Exemplar: Justin Lin, New Structural Economics, and the Unorthodox Orthodoxy of the China Model." *Politics & Policy* 48 (5).

Babones, Salvatore. 2020. "China's Development Model: Can it be Replicated in Sub-Saharan Africa?" *Politics & Policy* 48 (5).

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### Introducción al número especial: Desplazamiento estratégico del modelo de China en África

*El artículo introductorio examina el concepto de localización estratégica, que es central al presente número especial de Politics & Policy. Nos enfocamos en cómo, ya sea por la sobrevivencia del régimen o por razones pragmáticas, los estados africanos reinterpretan el desarrollo de China, así como el discurso y las preferencias que buscan implementar en contextos locales. Nuestra hipótesis es que el modelo de desarrollo de China se ha convertido en un lugar común retórico que se utiliza para legitimar políticas que (1) se asumen como las más conducentes para la sobrevivencia del régimen (p.e., sin condicionalidades políticas y distribuyendo recursos a las élites) y (2) como superiores a otros modelos de desarrollo (más apropiados para naciones en desarrollo; capaces de desarrollar estados fuertes). En este artículo introductorio destacamos también los principales argumentos y hallazgos de los artículos del número especial.*

**Palabras Clave:** Modelo Chino de desarrollo, Localización estratégica, Sobrevivencia del estado.

#### 特刊导论：中国模式在非洲的战略部署

本篇导论分析了战略本地化概念，它是本期《政治与政策》特刊的主题核心。我们聚焦出于政权生存和/或现实原因的非洲国家如何重新诠释中国的发展话语及发展偏好，并将话语和偏好落实到各自地区。我们假设，中国发展模式已成为一种普遍修辞，用于对政策进行合法化，这些政策被认为是（1）更有利于政权生存（例如没有政治制约、资源在精英间的传播），（2）优于其他发展模式（更适用于发展中国家、更有利于打造强国）。本文还将对本期特刊收录的其他文章进行总结，强调其各自的论点与研究结果。

**关键词:** 中国模式, 非洲, 中国-非洲, 战略本地化, 政权生存.

China is becoming a key actor in international development (Babones, Åberg, and Hodzi 2020). From trade and investment projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, which Xi Jinping has dubbed the “project of the century,” to infrastructure- and development-oriented financial institutions such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, China is carving a niche for itself as financier and champion of development in the Global South. Internally, its sustained economic growth lifted several hundred million Chinese out of poverty and propelled China to become the world’s second largest economy. Such unprecedented poverty reduction has unsurprisingly drawn the attention of most African countries—and they are looking up to China for a model of development and poverty reduction.

However, as China’s poverty reduction and economic growth strategies gain traction, there is growing concern in the West and in some parts of Africa that it is challenging dominant models of development advanced by traditional

Western powers. In propelling a model of development supposedly predicated on different norms and values to the “normative power” of the EU and the neoliberal values dominant in international development cooperation, China is gaining influence in African countries disenchanted with “failures” of neoliberal development paradigms. Yet, although there is a shared sense that China’s model is different from other Western development models, there are ambiguities and uncertainties among policy makers and scholars on what the “China Model” is, whether China’s role performance is challenging global development governance, and whether the “model” is replicable elsewhere.

In addition, there is a gap in existing literature in terms of ascertaining empirically and through case studies, whether China’s development represents a genuine innovation that can inspire Africa’s own development trajectory or is merely a diversification of dependency on outside powers. This Special Issue of *Politics & Policy* attempts to fill that gap. The gap is further complicated by, on one hand, China’s insistence that its model of development cannot be replicated elsewhere, while on the other, references are made by several leaders in Africa to a China model, which they claim is influencing their own countries’ development trajectories. What are they implementing? Are they creating their own versions of the China model? In any case, despite its ambiguities, why is the China model appealing to political elites in some African countries? In exploring these questions, this Special Issue sheds light on the variant conceptualizations, historical contexts, strategic deployment, and praxis of the “China Model” in Africa and examines whether what makes it so appealing to African elites is the model’s distinctiveness—or rather its ambiguities.

### **State of the Research: The Rise of the China Model(s)**

In spite of its appeal, the “China Model” of development is an ambiguous concept, whose conceptualization and praxis is fraught with uncertainties and complexities. How and why some countries are deploying the China model is still underresearched. The focus of existing research is on its varying components and its implications for the United States’ global interests (Ang 2018; Beeson and Li 2015; Halper 2010; Weiss 2019). This Special Issue focuses on how African countries, often neglected in international relations and global politics scholarship, are exercising agency (Brown 2012; Mohan and Lampert 2013; Odoom and Andrews 2017) in deploying the China model, and examines how multiple variants of the China model are emerging in Africa. It also shows how political elites in some African countries use the China model to achieve their local objectives and strategically derive more benefits from China. This highlights an important perspective: namely, that the variations in the China model are a result of varied interpretation and/or strategic localization by ruling elites in Africa.

Replicability of the China model has been researched, but there still is no consensus. Opinions vary. Some argue that the so-called “Beijing Consensus” (Ramo 2004) is not an accurate depiction of China’s development trajectory;

neither is there consensus among Chinese policy makers and economists on what an economic development model should look like (Ferchen 2013; Kennedy 2010). Others argue that there is a model of development in existence with particular institutional features unique to China (Chen and Naughton 2017; Naughton 2010; Zhang 2012). In particular, Naughton (2010) outlines a set of economic conditions and six specific institutional features<sup>1</sup> that are unique to China and fundamental to understanding its economic development and industrial system. Naughton's position resonates with the China exceptionalism argument advanced by Zhang Weiwei. Zhang (2012, 53) argues that China is a civilizational state with "four supers" (super-large population, super-vast territory, super-long traditions, and super-rich culture) and "four uniques" (unique language, unique politics, unique society, and unique economy), which combine to make a "China Model" of development exceptional and difficult to replicate. Naughton acknowledges that other states can learn lessons from China's institutional features. However, like Zhang, he is wary of their universal applicability, given how closely connected they are to initial economic conditions unique to China.

Ling Chen and Barry Naughton (2017) argue that there is no single "China Model," but three China models; or rather, they argue that China's model of economic development has gone through three waves of change where the distinct institutional features co-evolve through its interaction between economic and political forces. Often other East Asian states are credited with developing the East Asian development model that China's own model draws from (Huat 2017; Kroeber 2016; Liu and Wang 2015; Zhao 2010). Arthur Kroeber (2016) claims that China's approach to economic development resembles the East Asian developmental state model in terms of "land to the tiller" agricultural reform, export-oriented manufacturing, and financial repression. Yet, Kroeber further highlights two features that make China different from its East Asian neighbors: that is, heavy reliance on state-owned enterprises and extensive use of foreign direct investment in special economic zones (Kroeber 2016, 11-5).

Although widely criticized, some suggest not only that the China model exists, but also that it is an exportable alternative to the Washington Consensus (Harper 2010; Ramo 2004). Arguments that the China model is an alternative to the Washington Consensus are often accompanied by assertions that the

<sup>1</sup> The six features are the following: (1) public ownership can be reasonably efficient, and the "mixed economy" is a decent model of industrial organization; (2) competition is (still) more important than ownership; (3) public ownership can be used to exploit market power and generate revenues for investment and public goods' creation; (4) a strategy of investment-led growth is essential. Therefore, it is acceptable to invest out ahead of demand, creating capacity that is only gradually utilized; (5) for a growth-oriented polity, the state sector may be used aggressively to create growth (and revenue) opportunities outside the state sector; (6) managers of publicly owned corporations can be motivated by tying their compensation to their company's performance in maximizing asset value.

“China Model” is distinctly a model of authoritarian capitalism derailing liberal democracy in the Global South. However, Åberg (2018) asserts that concerns of an antidemocratic “reverse wave” epitomized by the China model are exaggerated because the China model is not gaining as much traction as is sometimes believed. Building on this body of literature, three articles in this Special Issue explore, from the perspective of countries in Africa, whether the “China Model” is replicable, and, how they are replicating it in their local contexts, if it is replicable.

The diversity of opinion on whether a distinct China model exists and if it is replicable suggests that there are different “China Models” applied to different contexts (governance, development, security, etc.). This makes it clear why an examination of the “China Model” notion is critical. While scholars have yet to provide a clear answer to these questions, policy makers and experts—including former Chief Economist of the World Bank Justin Lin—argue that developing countries, and African countries in particular, can learn from China’s development experience (Åberg and Becker 2019; Lin 2011, 2012; Lin and Treichel 2012; Lin and Wang 2015). Lin’s argument finds resonance in that African leaders, especially in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, have voiced their desire to adopt and follow the China model. This gives rise to a puzzle: what version of the China model is appealing to these African leaders? Is the popularity of the China model due to its precise features and practical prescriptions; or is it due, instead, to the fact that the China model is an empty signifier that African leaders can fill with the content of their choice? Or is it most of all appealing in comparison to models promoted by the EU and IMF/World Bank, which come with more economic and political reform strings attached, or is the China model not very different from mainstream approaches to development? These questions underlie the contributions in this Special Issue.

### **Theorizing the China Model(s): Centering African Agency**

To understand the strategic deployment of the “China Model” by African political elites, relational constructivism (Jackson 2004, 2013) provides an apt theoretical perspective. From this viewpoint, we conceive of the “China Model” as a rhetorical commonplace that legitimates certain political action performed in its name. We are thus not dealing with one specific “China Model,” but multiple varieties of the China model, which should be considered products of “ongoing constitutive practices” (Jackson 2004, 285) in varying local African contexts. In this sense, the China model as a rhetorical commonplace is not a predetermined concept, notion, or model capturing an objective Chinese political or economic development trajectory, but an “ambiguous resource” (286) that African political elites use in line with their own idiosyncratic strategic and political purposes, in relation to specific material conditions and social contexts. In addition, it is a

resource that African leaders use to signal their allegiance to China in return for increased bilateral trade and preferential trade arrangements with Beijing.

Accordingly, the uses of the “China Model” relates to African actors’ different understandings and interpretations of China’s political regime, governance model, and development experience as well as it relates to the real social interaction among the various actors that make up differing instances of China-Africa relations. Viewing the China model, or rather, various China models as rhetorical commonplaces emphasizes African agency, especially how African political actors engage in local processes of negotiation that “lock down” the meaning of this ambiguous cultural resource (Jackson 2004). Policy implications follow and various actors and practices are tied together in the name of China, so to speak.

The relational constructivist perspective and the conceptualization of the “China Model” as a rhetorical commonplace connects well with the concept of strategic localization (Regilme 2018), which explains how weaker states, for regime survival and/or pragmatic reasons, reinterpret the dominant power’s development discourse and preferences and implement them in their local contexts. Hence, we hypothesize that the “China Model” has become a rhetorical commonplace that is strategically used by African political elites and other nonstate actors to legitimize policies perceived to be: (1) better for regime survival (e.g., no political conditionalities; dissemination of resources to elites without political strings attached); and (2) superior to other development models (e.g., more suitable for developing countries, and better at developing strong states).

### Synopsis

The different case studies in this Special Issue show the idiosyncratic and agentic aspects of the “China Model.” The focus is on how African political elites in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania variously deploy it. In his contribution to this Special Issue, Abel A. Kinyondo shows how Tanzania’s development trajectory drew inspiration from China’s own development path. He shows how political leaders in Tanzania, through several phases of reforms, adapted China’s Maoist economic growth path into an African version of socialism *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* (socialism and self-reliance) in the 1967 Arusha Declaration. Although, the current China model of development is believed to have begun with Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1978, Tanzania’s leaders had long before then regarded China as a model to emulate for state-directed development. The failures of the *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* show, as argued by Kinyondo, that China is unique; therefore any attempts to replicate its model of development in Tanzania fails unless it is adapted to a “home-grown model.”

In his historical analysis of the China’s political-economic development and emergence of its model of authoritarian capitalism or state-sponsored



neoliberalism, Salvatore Babones concurs with Kinyondo that the China model cannot be replicated in Africa. His reason, which is different from Kinyondo's, is that African states lack the bureaucratic development that underwrite the China model of development. Partly, this is due to Africa's colonial history that left the African state less developed—lacking indigenous state bureaucracies comparable to China's during the Qing Dynasty. In his conclusion, Babones argues that proponents of an exportable China model able to jumpstart development in developing countries ignore the “deep historical contrasts that separate China from most of the world's low-income countries today.” Thus, unless African states develop their institutional and bureaucratic capacities, the China model will not be a panacea to their lack of development.

One of the main proponents of some kind of China model is Justin Lin, a former Chief Economist and Senior Vice President of the World Bank, advisor to the Ethiopian government and dean of the Institute of New Structural Economics at Peking University. In their article in this issue, John H. S. Åberg and Derick Becker critically engage Lin's theory of New Structural Economics, showing how Lin has used his influential positions to promote China as an exemplar for developing countries to achieve economic development. Contrary to growing perceptions that the China model competes with the liberal development paradigms, Åberg and Becker argue that the China model, as depicted by Lin, is not “a competing counter-hegemonic model” but complementary to the global capitalist system and disseminated from the center of multilateral development finance—the World Bank. Simon Davidsson's article partly connects to this conclusion. It shows that there is no evidence “that Chinese economic engagement fosters authoritarianism in Africa.”

This conclusion somewhat differs from Niall Duggan's. Using a constructivist role theory framework, Duggan shows how China's policy behavior and self-identification as the “Champion of the Developing World” is located at the nexus of its domestic, historical, and external role expectations. Accordingly, as China's model of development succeeds locally and is replicated abroad, China is emerging as a new force in defining rules, norms, ideas, and institutions in global governance.

African states are often portrayed as ineffectual passive recipients of development models from the West, and now China. Obert Hodzi's article challenges that narrative—arguing that political leaders in African countries are shaping and diffusing norms relating to the China model—thus influencing the remodeling of the China model. The result is that there are multiple varieties of China models, which delicately balance the domestic and external interests of Africa's political elites. Willie D. Ganda's contribution applies this argument in his discussion of how successive governments in Zimbabwe have used the China model to achieve their local and foreign policy objectives. Chronicling Zimbabwe's “Look East Policy,” Ganda shows how the absence of public sector management capabilities in Zimbabwe mean that the replication of the China model will not yield any tangible results. While Zimbabwe failed to adapt the

China model for economic development, Ethiopia, as shown by Edson Ziso's article in this Special Issue, adapted the China model with remarkable results, despite the China model's ambiguities. Ziso attributes Ethiopia's success to social forces and interests inside Ethiopia that influence adoption of the China model among other neoliberal development models for national development and political preservation of the ruling class.

Despite efforts made in this Special Issue, there remain significant gaps in research on the China model and its replicability in Africa that demand further research. African countries are not homogenous, neither are their states monolith. What role do local actors and interests play in framing the China model discourse in Africa? How are these varying, and oftentimes competing actors and interests shaping the conceptualization and implementation of the China model in Africa? These questions are essential to understanding the different motivations and de-motivations in Africa regarding the China model and are essential to re-inserting African agency in international development while laying foundations for a comprehensive assessment of the suitability of the China model to individual African countries.

In sum, the Special Issue shows the complexities of deciphering a China model that is shrouded in ambiguity. The ambiguity, reflecting on Duggan's contribution in this Special Issue is possibly explained by the evolving nature of China's role, as self-projected and as projected by the developing world and the West. At the nexus of these three contradictory role identification and projection of China is the China model—seen not for what it is, but for what it can achieve for its implications on the delicate balance of global power. Discussions on its replicability in the developing world, particularly in Africa, adds to the model's complexity. The emerging consensus in this Special Issue is that the China model is difficult to replicate in Africa. Babones' arguments are instructive to this discussion. He argues that, first, the China model lacks prescriptive power: "says what a country should be, but not how it should become. That leaves potential followers of the China model to figure out for themselves how to become what they are not" (Babones, this issue). Second, states attempting to replicate the China model lack the bureaucratic capacity and high level of state institutionalization required to drive economic development. Ganda and Kinyondo concur with this—and their case studies of Zimbabwe and Tanzania reflect that. Simply put, as noted by Babones in this Special Issue, states in Africa cannot adopt Chinese-style state neoliberalism because they lack the bureaucratic capacity to do so. Such a fundamentally evolutionary approach to increasing the strength of the state will not yield rapid results. If it is the only viable approach, then any efforts to implement a "China Model" (or any other model that requires effective state bureaucracies) by low capacity Sub-Saharan African states are doomed to fail.



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