

Moving Beyond the ‘global’ and ‘international’ paradigms Reframe the discourse of development studies through the study of World Bank projects in Mainland China

Zhiwei Chen*

Kings College London, UK, London WC2R 2LS UK

*Corresponding author. Email: chenzhiwei0328@163.com

Abstract. Theoretical interpretation of development studies has been highly characterized by a highly antagonistic dichotomy. They propose two highly contradictory propositions, one advocating universality, dependence, and interconnectedness (the global paradigm), and the other emphasizing polarization, independence, and asymmetry on the opposite (the international paradigm). By analyzing the World Bank’s development projects in Mainland China from 1981 to 2021, this study argues that while the ‘global paradigm’ to assess ‘development’ is more in line with the Chinese context, the ‘domestic’ nature rooted in development studies should also be elaborated and emphasized. Furthermore, this article seeks to revise the macro narration of the development studies by reconstructing a bottom-up narrative, which scholars in this field have so far failed to do.

Keywords: International Political Economy, Development Studies, International Development, Global Development.

1. Introduction

‘Moving from international development to global development is a recognition that we live in “one world” –not “North” or “South” or First and Third Worlds’ [1].

‘Moving to “global development” narrative will reproduce a forgetting of the past ... It would be important to revive the classical concern about domestic inequality and redistribution [2].

These are two excerpts from two pieces of political economy articles both of them aim to construct a dialectic paradigm that fits the contours of development in the 21st century. They offer two highly contradictory propositions, the first advocating universality, dependency and interconnectedness, while the other emphasizes the polarization, independency and asymmetry on the opposite. Thus, this paper tends to interrogate such discursive binary by analyzing development projects issued by the global agency in Mainland China from 1981 to 2021, World Bank. In addition, this study argues that, although the ‘global paradigm’ for assessing ‘development’ is more in line with the Chinese context, the ‘domestic’ nature rooted in development should also be elaborated and highlighted. Furthermore, this thesis seeks to amend the macro narration of the development studies by reconstructing a bottom-up narrative, which scholars in this field have so far failed to do. Hence, it will advocate micro and nuanced ways to reframe the macro and dichotomic theorization of development studies.

2. Structure

This study will be divided into two parts. The first section aims to introduce the general definition of ‘development’, then to elaborate on the theoretical debate on the development potential of globalized capitalism. This section will begin by analyzing the recent academic narration on development studies by reviewing the current discussions on the division of concepts between ‘global development’ and ‘international development’. In addition to the reflection on the literature, an analysis of the methods and narrations applied in these studies should also be conducted critically. Moreover, it can be found that they commonly lack a micro agency that concentrates on micro and bottom-up research of a series of development projects, which possibly be caused by a binary framework of two highly contradictory hypotheses.

The second section will seek to break through such methodological constraints by examining the case studies of the development projects in Mainland China. By applying a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, this section will provide a critical evaluation of Chinese development projects proposed by the World Bank. In addition, one of the development projects, Sustainable Development in Poor Rural Areas (2010-2015), will be studied in detail in this study.

3. General Definition of ‘development’

Despite the ubiquity of the term ‘development’, there has always been about what exactly it means. First introduced in the late 1940s, the concept of development initially referred to the purposeful transformation of the dynamically changing international system, which included challenges in several dimensions such as economic income, national health, and environmental resources[3]. Nonetheless, in the context of political economy, two related conceptualizations have been addressed in response to such ambiguity. The first was Michael Cowen and Robert W. Shenton’s clear distinction between the concept of development as an ‘immanent process’ and an ‘intentional practice’, the latter concept originally conceived as a tool of the government to manage the disorders that resulted from capitalist transformation [4]. The second concept refers to Gillian Hart’s famous D/d distinction, which is provided as the research focus of this paper. Big ‘D’ development is portrayed as intentional assistance of the developed agencies to intervene and promote positive change in relatively developing areas. Alongside the big ‘D’ development, the small ‘d’ development is characterized by a wider pattern of neoliberal capitalism transformation, producing both winners and losers in a global system [5]. However, more scholars sit on the challenge of the Big D narration, that is, the North to South aid has been overshadowed by the increasingly complex developments intersected with globalized capitalism. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to reflect on this divergence and further reassess it through the case of China.

4. Literature Review: theoretical debate on ‘development study’

Theoretical interpretations of development studies have been highly characterized by a highly antagonistic dichotomy. The one side has been dominated by scholars such as Rory Horner and David Hulme, who insisted that ‘the potential of an emerging global development paradigm is more applicable to the world as a whole’ [6]. Nevertheless, on the other side, scholars such as Andrew M. Fischer still embrace development with a classical approach, in which ‘development’ is more of a national project. The ‘global narration’ would obscure the nature and definition of development [2].

The ‘global development paradigm’ is more of an orthodoxy. Despite being huge in authorship, articles with such narration almost present highly similar contents [7-9]. Beyond the North-South binary of the late 20th and early 21st-centuries, interconnected globalizing capitalism has prompted widespread questions about development as an endogenous process within developing countries [10-11]. The three main supporting arguments in such accounts are ‘increasing South-South assistance’, ‘poverty in developed countries’ and ‘the environment is a global common’[12-14]. Therefore, in such an interpretation, it is argued that moving beyond the ‘global paradigm’ developmental geography and focusing only on the Global South is more general to contemporary outcomes.

In recent years, however, some scholars have begun to challenge this orthodoxy transformation from ‘international development’ to ‘global development’, highlighting the persistence of asymmetries of wealth and power. Andrew M. Fischer’s 2019 article ‘bring development back to development studies’ is important for responding and evaluating this ‘global development paradigm’. his study , for instance, attempts to elevate the prevailing domestic inequality as the counterargument towards the ‘global paradigm’ [2]. Consequently, redistribution in setting the stage for domestic resource mobilization remains a highly primary concern for some relatively underdeveloped countries and regions, which cannot be adequately captured by the interpretation of ‘global trajectory’. Thence, the still retaining importance of a national project that sometimes may paradoxically face the

inequality issue brought by the ‘universalizing’ globalized capitalism, which further undermines of interpretation of ‘global development’.

What is not fully explored or understood, however, is the manner in which both the economic outcomes and social transformation produced by basic development projects have changed in a certain areas. Although these two aspects appear highly distinguished and distinctive, they both tend to adopt the broad conceptual lens of ‘instrumental policies’. For instance, the protagonist of this paper, Mainland China, has been both widely used in these two aspects, while maintaining a high degree of universality and macro [15-17]. Accordingly, current literature mainly documents ‘development’ as a whole, which is overwhelmingly accepted as a macro ideology or policies at the institutional level or even the global level. Thus, they ignore the important activism at the ground level of development projects themselves. Hence, this study also tries to avoid such a macro narrative by reevaluating the ‘development’ from a bottom-up perspective.

5. Methodology and database analysis

This study has benefited greatly from the World Bank ‘s procurement archives, where development projects supported and documented by the Bank form the main database for the study. Founded in 1944, the World Bank is an international organization providing developmental aids to middle and low-income countries [18]. The database has proved particularly valuable in studying development in China. Because not only are the numbers huge, but detailed descriptions and evaluations of these projects are also saved and represented in their accounts.

Nonetheless, it is significant to identify the limitations of sources materials. First, the database may fail to adequately assess the full impact of development projects in globalizing capitalism, since it examines the issue essentially front beginning to end. The focus on initial bidding, procurement processes and rapid assessment, while neglecting the continuous tracking of projects, is indeed a major flaw rooted in the primary sources. To overcome this drawback, institutional reports and media coverages related to the follow-up of development projects should be used as supplementary sources.

Second, determined by the analytical focus of the development projects proposed and loaned by the World Bank, it may paradoxically prove that development is ‘big D development’ in nature, because it is essentially North aid to South. Thence, in order to cope with such a limitation, the study here first expounds the first argument, which continues to be used for World Bank loans even in Mainland China, where scholars use the most frequent national cases to prove the globalization of capitalism, while in turn exposing the internal contradictions of the interpretation of the ‘global development paradigm’. Secondly, this study will concentrate on the ‘full story’ of one of the development projects-Sustainable Development in Poor Rural Areas (2010-2015), which sector is actually responsible for the project; the ways in which the project is organized and processed, and the potential impact the project may have, will be explored to further push the boundaries of so-called ‘big D narrative’.

Consequently, in response to the methodological limitations within both ‘global’ and ‘international’ narrations, this study tends to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to comprehensively study the development potential of the Chinese mainland. In terms of quantitative research, based on a large amount of data, this study will use such a mathematical method to explore the overall layout and general legacy of development projects from 1981 to 2021. In addition, the qualitative approach will be deployed through the 2010-2015 poverty alleviation project microlens, focusing on three specific dimensions: cause, process, and result.

5.1 Quantitative Research

Two analytical points will be elevated by adapting the quantitative research. First, it will conduct a scale of on two questions: what are the themes of these projects, and what is the proportion of each theme. Secondly, the period from 1981 to 2021 will be divided into four turning points. Observing changes in their total number of projects as well project themes in each for a decade,.

First, ‘Pollution’, ‘poverty’ and ‘environment’ are the most popular themes. According to the World Bank database, a total of 484 projects, of which two largest were pollution management, addressing hygiene issues (121 in total) and rural services, addressing the distribution of infrastructure (109 in total) [20]. These two main categories were followed by climate change (89 in total) as well as environmental policy (79 in total) [20]. Thus, it can be observed that while solving poverty and distributional inequalities within the country, World Bank lending to development projects in Mainland China is more focused on climate and environmental issues, which are highly bounded within the ‘global development paradigm’.

Secondly, the changes in the number and themes of projects over the years rather illustrate that although the theme ‘environment’ has gradually replaced ‘poverty’ as the main objective, these two subjects are still of the most significant in development of Mainland China. First, in the first decade, from 1981 to 1991, a total of 86 projects were completed and the largest proportion of which involved rural services and infrastructure allocation services (17 in total) [21]. Between 1991 and 2001, the number of projects doubled, most notably in addressing climate change and environmental policy, even though poverty alleviation remains the dominant theme [22]. In the decade 2001-2001, the total number of projects was still increasing compared to the previous decade, and for the first time, the number of projects addressing climate change surpassed those addressing inequality and rural services (43 and 27 in total respectively) [23]. Since 2001, there has been no significant change in this proportion pattern, with climate policy and global warming projects leading the way, followed by projects to improve domestic poverty and inequality in resource distribution [24]. Therefore, not only has the total number of projects continued to climb, but the two main themes of environment and poverty alleviation have remained constant.

Thence, according to such mathematical analysis, two findings will be made. First, aid projects continuous to increase, and poverty alleviation remains a top priority. It thus reveals that Chinese development has been continually supported by the ‘Global North’ to alleviate domestic poverty, which makes Fischer’s ‘North-South binaries’ and ‘between-country inequality’ extremely plausible. However, the dominant theme of these projects has gradually shifted from addressing domestic to focusing more on climate change and environmental issues in a global context, which may affiliate the ‘global development’ theorization. Accordingly, it can be found that such a bottom-up lens further exposes complexity that diminishes the boundaries between the two labels.

5.2 Qualitative Research: Sustainable Development in Poor Rural Area (2010-2015)

As discussed in the aforementioned section, it indicates that China, even as it becomes increasingly ‘globalized’, still need to address domestic inequalities. Furthermore, in this section, qualitative research on sustainable development project for poverty alleviation assistance in poorest communities and families in Henan, Shaanxi, and Chongqing provinces will be conducted. Two aspects of how the project was organized, and the results and impact, will be analysed, based on World Bank's documentation and relevant media reports.

In terms of organization of the project, despite the loan from the World Bank, this project was procured through domestic competitive bidding. The actual contractor, consultants and project teams were confined to China without any technical assistance from developing countries [25-26]. Therefore, in such an account, despite the World Bank has provided US\$100 million loan as the financial assistance, the project remains predominantly confined to a South-South instead a North-South paradigm.

Referring to the result and impact of this project, it can be argued that the potential for this particular development project can be analysed within the ‘globalizing capitalism’ and ‘domestic inequality’ paradigm. First, since the welfare of the rural poor is supported as a source of cheap labour, it may further promote urbanization and labour quality. It can be argued that this project could potentially facilitate the acceleration of integrating into an open economy and thus globalized capitalism [27]. Second, the development of globalizing capitalism is still accompanied by domestic development, particularly concerning the dramatic inequality and poverty. Implemented in Henan

Province, Shaanxi Province, and Chongqing Municipality, the project benefited more than 950,000 people through community-led development and community development funds, improved rural infrastructure and public services such as roads and drinking water, and increasing the income of poor farming households [28-29]. Accordingly, the lens of such a project highlights how 'global' and 'national' outcomes interact in a way that neither the 'global paradigm' nor the 'international paradigm' can fully delineate.

5.3 Analysis

Overall, a systematic and comprehensive study of development projects in Mainland China from 1981 to 2021 suggests that there are indeed three pieces of evidence for the potential of development projects in a 'global paradigm discourse'. They are: 1) more attention to global development on climate issues; 2) the need to recognize the role of development projects in addressing domestic poverty and inequality, promoting urbanization, labour mobility and therefore the capital market; 3) break the North-South aid model, and make it more applicable to a more globalized South-South narration. Hence, these implications in Chinese context highly reveal that it is now no longer a purely 'developed-to-developing' aid solution to the backwardness of the Global South, but rather when the 'rescued' side would be able to integrate into global capitalism and even engage in global crisis autonomously.

Nevertheless, such a global paradigm is never a linear trajectory for the development in China. Sustaining financial lending to the World Bank to address domestic development issues and the persistence of extreme poverty and development inequality in the country demonstrates and vindicates the value of the classic 'international development' discourse. And it strongly suggests that, in development studies, promoting global capitalism and alleviating domestic inequality often reveal in parallel. Thus, the case of Mainland China further recommends that the deeply rooted dichotomy between 'global development' and 'international development' dialectical discourse in development and political economy studies should be rethought.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study attempts to demonstrate the importance of micro and grounded narration to discourse construction in development studies. Political economists support the use of macro testimony, such as political institutions and economic policies, to justify the 'international' or 'global' discourse in their own words. This study, although useful, attempted to apply a bottom-up agency of the development projects themselves to question the dichotomy between these two dominant narratives rooted in current development studies. A study of development projects in mainland China in the World Bank account suggests that it cannot elaborate a linear trajectory that determinedly characterizes the potential of development in China as wholly 'global' or 'national'. Rather, it shows that while the 'globalized capitalism' paradigm is more compatible with Chinese development model, the nature of the narrowing of income divergences at the national level should also be critically addressed and highlighted.

And this analysis could therefore shed a light on the terminology debate between the 'global development' and 'international development' narrations. As aforementioned literature review, scholars have challenged the binary between 'North and South', 'developed and developing'. This study thereby suggests a new way for further research of development studies, that is, to further question and challenge the dichotomy of 'global' and 'national', so that the macro narrations in the study of political economy has a broader branch.

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