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### Far Away from the Factories

Participants at the Inauguration Ceremony of the Global Development Promotion Center (全球发展促进中心). Source: [United Nations China](#).

# Global China's Knowledge Infrastructure: The Rise of International Development Studies in China

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*This essay examines the creation of international development studies in China over the past decade as an intellectual project. It traces the genealogy of the nascent state disciplinary apparatus, making visible the evolving landscape of individuals, institutions, and ideologies at a complicated moment of geopolitical flux, in close relation to the Belt and Road Initiative and the intensifying US–China rivalry. Examining the rise of a division of social–scientific labour in this light reveals something profound about how Chinese political and intellectual elites attempt to organise the world and find China’s place in it.*

Over the past decade, a growing, albeit still small, number of university departments and government think tanks focusing on international development teaching and research have been established in China. A particularly important cohort of Chinese academics and policy researchers (hereinafter, ‘expert-scholars’) has come to be publicly identified as advisors, advocates, theorists, and critics who contribute in more or less direct and influential ways to China’s international development thinking and praxis. Located in different disciplines and institutions, these expert-scholars increasingly represent a loose but rapidly consolidating ‘epistemic community’ with a common policy enterprise—that is, to supply ideas to China’s accelerating development cooperation that are increasingly focused on legitimising a celebratory account of the ‘China Model’. Their intellectual efforts include describing China’s developmental path and promoting it as a model of development in Global South–South relations—efforts that are often accompanied by the de-politicisation of development and China’s domestic trajectory, with the potential result of partner countries glossing over the ‘dark side’ of the Chinese story.

Historically, Chinese policymakers and expert-scholars have been unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with the notion of international development as an independent policy field of the kind that emerged in the West in the 1950s. The official discourse does not distinguish ‘aid’ from Third World solidarity or economic cooperation (Tan–Mullins et al. 2010). While this narrative remains crucial, under his ‘great power diplomacy’

doctrine, Chinese President Xi Jinping (2017b) has called for the enhancement of ‘China’s international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape’ the external world. Following the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and in the context of intensifying US–China rivalry, a discursive field has emerged in which the meaning of international development is being rearticulated by Chinese policymakers and expert-scholars, engendering an expanding state-disciplinary apparatus. This new discursive field is not independent of geopolitical and geo-economic discourses, producing divisions of knowledge that constitute objects such as ‘development’ and spaces like ‘BRI countries’ as targets for ‘partnership’.

More than an academic practice, Chinese international development studies should be considered a state-sponsored attempt to build Global China’s knowledge infrastructure—that is, regimes of knowledge that produce, transmit, and stabilise ‘truths’ about other peoples and places. This is not unique to China. The making of development studies (and area studies) in the West, mostly in the 1950s and 1960s, was underpinned by the colonial era and the beginnings of the Cold War (Bernstein 2006; Cooper and Packard 1997; Kothari 2019). Pletsch (1981: 584) persuasively argues that ‘it was the sudden appearance of the Soviet bloc in Western strategic calculations that gave rise to the three worlds scheme, modernization theory, and the systematic division of social scientific labor’. Often supported by contracts from governments and aid agencies for vocational training, applied research, and consultancy, Western development studies was integral to the postwar explosion of institutions, professions, organisations, and disciplines whose *raison d’être* was development (Watts 1993).

The rise of Chinese international development studies locates the intertwined geographies of Global China as not only ‘out there’, but also ‘in here’. This relational perspective is timely because, while much has been said about the influence of China’s internal dynamics on its overseas engagements, less discussed is the transformation experienced at home during such outward-facing processes (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011). Approaching the rise of Chinese international development studies in this vein brings to the fore China’s domestic reorganisation of power and discourse and the attendant institutional change given its global ‘rise’. It also advances the understanding of Global China as a work-in-progress of Chinese–global entanglements and as a ‘method’ insofar as it ‘helps us overcome the longstanding “methodological nationalism” that has plagued China studies, area studies, and the social sciences in general’ (Lee 2022: 29; see also Byler 2021; Franceschini and Loubere 2022).

## Studying Foreign Aid and Development Cooperation

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has a history of providing aid to foreign countries that stretches as far back as 1950 (Bräutigam 2009). Diverging from Western norms, Chinese development finance takes several forms, ranging from grant aid, aid in kind,

and zero-interest loans, to subsidised loans, commercial loans, and investments. However, the study of aid as a distinct research subject did not take off as early in China. While Chinese expert-scholars had begun watching US and Soviet aid in the 1950s, it was not until the early 1970s that the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) set up an in-house research unit within the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, where a small team of policy staff monitored Chinese aid flows. The unit, later formalised as the Institute of Foreign Aid (商务部对外援助研究所) and renamed in 2014 the Institute of International Development Cooperation (商务部国际发展合作研究所), was China's first and, for a long time, only research institution dedicated to the subject.

While the institute's establishment and growth could be said to owe much to endogenous policy needs, the gradual emergence of Chinese international development studies since the 2000s has more to do with exogenous context, conditions, and impetuses, or the combined 'push and pull' of domestic and global forces strongly shaped by key geopolitical events. Specifically, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation 2006 Beijing Summit, with its significant aid commitments, led many in the 'traditional' development regime (including official agencies, the media and public, academia, and think tanks) to recognise and question China's aid policies and development impact in Africa and beyond (Manning 2006). International accusations of neocolonialism and 'rogue aid' (for example, Naim 2009) and domestic concerns about punching above one's weight when there was vast poverty at home propelled several Chinese Africanists as well as international relations and world economics scholars who had studied Western aid to write about the 'time-tested' China–Africa friendship and South–South solidarity.

Active expert-scholars at this stage came from Peking University (PKU), the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Xiamen University, among others. Most participated in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) China Study Group between 2009 and 2011—an informal arrangement initiated by the DAC to (cautiously) engage with 'non-DAC donors' (Manning 2006). Through various research taskforces and policy workshops, the group created the physical and discursive space in which to assemble a loose but emerging Chinese 'epistemic community'. During this period, some small research hubs on aid and development cooperation were set up, including at Xiamen University, as well as at the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) and the Chinese Agricultural University (CAU)—both in Beijing—although they existed in all but name only. The subject gained further momentum with interest from prominent scholars such as Xue Lan at Tsinghua University's School of Public Policy and Management, which is China's equivalent to Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

The inception of the BRI in 2013 brought with it a visible growth in academic and policy research and commentary, positioning aid and development cooperation as key pillars of the initiative's multifaceted international partnerships. Initially, the connection

was argued in terms of the BRI's resemblance to the Marshall Plan—a notion soon discredited by the Chinese Government for inspiring speculation about its geopolitical ambitions and 'spheres of influence'. Nevertheless, the fact that a large number of BRI-branded projects are funded by loans from China's policy banks, including the China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China, as well as China's increasing deployment of multilateral and sovereign development finance through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund (Liu et al. 2020), provided Chinese expert-scholars and their institutions with ample reasons to claim the relevance of studying aid and development cooperation. Subsequently, several Chinese universities created BRI-focused teaching or research programs in different disciplines, including Tsinghua (global governance), Fudan (international relations), Beijing Normal University (social policy), and CAU (rural studies).

The establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (中国国家国际发展合作署, CIDCA) in 2018, to consolidate aid management in support of the BRI and President Xi's 'great power diplomacy' doctrine, supplied Chinese expert-scholars with a strong sense of enthusiasm, as clearly manifested in the weeks of workshops, lectures, meetings, and conferences that followed the agency's establishment. Within three months, the Shanghai University of International Business and Economics founded the International Development Cooperation Academy, soon followed by UIBE's School of International Development and Cooperation, which was the first university department dedicated to the subject in China. Both have now grown into fully fledged academic institutions with research faculty and degree programs, with the common themes of aid and development cooperation as foreign policy instruments for the BRI at their core. In July 2022, CIDCA established its two 'do tanks': the Foreign Aid Support Center (对外援助服务保障中心), to improve the monitoring and evaluation of Chinese aid projects, and the Global Development Promotion Center (全球发展促进中心), to implement Xi's Global Development Initiative, which was announced in 2021.

## Studying Development Theory and Social Change

In the early 2000s, Western development agencies including the World Bank, the United Nations, and the (former) UK Department for International Development increasingly turned to the Chinese domestic experience of poverty reduction and economic growth in the Reform Era to explore lessons of international relevance that could potentially help achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Beijing viewed its poverty reduction as a success story—ideal for promoting China's 'peaceful rise' and addressing Western pressures for it to become a 'responsible international stakeholder' (Zoellick 2005). This convergence of interests led to Shanghai hosting the World Bank's Global Conference on Scaling Up Poverty Reduction in 2004 and, subsequently,

the establishment of the International Poverty Reduction Center in China (中国国际扶贫中心, IPRCC) in Beijing in 2006 to facilitate international research and training on China's development experience. The IPRCC was affiliated with the then Office of the State Council Leading Group on Poverty Alleviation and Development (国务院扶贫开发领导小组办公室; now the National Administration for Rural Revitalisation, 国务院乡村振兴局) and began to bring the latter's pool of Chinese expert-scholars specialising in national development into the realm of international development studies, including by involving them in the DAC China Study Group.

China's relatively successful weathering of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and its surpassing of Japan in 2010 to become the world's second-largest economy by nominal gross domestic product, led Beijing to raise its sights as a possible contender for world leadership. Notably, this gave rise to Beijing's open propagation of the 'China Model'—originally a foreign creation that came 'to be embraced subsequently by Chinese leaders and writers anxious to establish a developmental identity of China's own' (Dirlik 2012: 277). Following China's quick restoration of high growth rates, especially in contrast with continued challenges in major Western economies, there was a further surge of interest from many developing countries in learning from the Chinese experience (de Haan 2011). An important manifestation of this increasing interest was the World Bank's appointment of prominent PKU economist Justin Yifu Lin as its chief economist and senior vice-president from 2008 to 2012. Lin was the first citizen from a developing country to hold this post.

Under Xi Jinping, China has identified itself as 'moving closer and closer to the world's centre-stage' in the New Era of national rejuvenation and global re-emergence (Xi 2017b). Accompanying the growing discursive visibility of the China Model at home is the intensifying assertion of 'Chinese wisdom and Chinese solutions' (中国智慧和 中国方案) to problems facing the 'community with a shared future for mankind' (人类命运共同体). While continuing to object to the idea that there is a model to export, the Chinese Government changed from carefully noting that the Chinese experience may not be applicable in other contexts to declaring the China Model as the country's gift to the world. The new approach seems to contrast with the experimental, gradual, and contextual development of policies in China before Xi's era. Indeed, the 'model' seems to have changed too much to really represent a model. What are characterised as 'Chinese solutions' are often based on China's process of learning from other countries (in East Asia, for example). The emerging development discourse, however, has failed to capture these nuances.

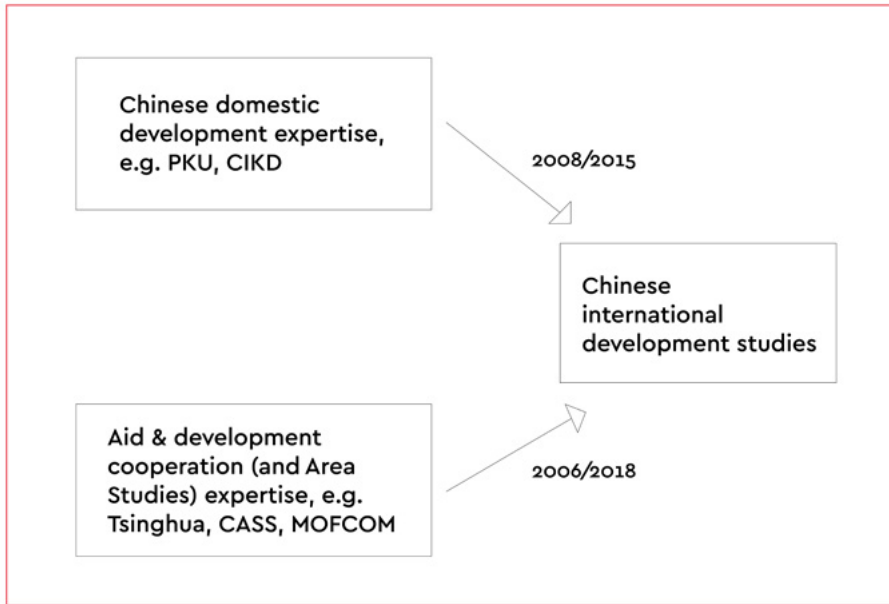
Against this backdrop, at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, Xi announced the establishment of the Institute of South–South Cooperation and Development (南南合作与发展学院, ISSCAD), now hosted by PKU with Justin Yifu Lin as its inaugural dean, and the Center for International Knowledge on Development (中国国际发展知识中心, CIKD), based at the Development Research Center of the State Council, which is the Cabinet's premier think tank. ISSCAD and the CIKD

have been tasked with reviewing and sharing the Chinese experience with other developing countries, with the former focusing more on CIDCA-funded academic programs and the latter on policy engagement (although the distinction is blurred in practice).

The ethos of ISSCAD draws closely on Lin's ambition since his return to Beijing in 2012 to construct a Chinese/non-Western development (economics) theory. For him, China's 'unprecedented economic miracle' should be held up as a 'goldmine' for theoretical innovation, to move towards a theory of the 'general principles' behind a country's development (Lin 2019). Lin also makes a qualitative distinction between the different locations of knowledge production. In his view, the validity of a theory/experience depends on fulfilling the preconditions of that theory or experience, and the preconditions are more similar among developing countries than between developing and developed countries (Lin 2017). Lin thus argues that sharing experiences among developing countries and learning theories generated *from* developing countries (in this case, China) are more useful for realising developing countries' aspirations for industrialisation and modernisation. In this vein, ISSCAD promises to theorise from the Global South, by 'removing the shackles' of the Western-dominated paradigm of development studies (Lin 2017).

Similarly, the CIKD's premise is founded on the apparently stark contrast between the vast poverty in the Global South and China's remarkable changes in recent decades (even though there are many developing countries with higher living standards than China), which leads it to contend that many countries have not found a development theory and path that are suitable to their conditions (Xinhua 2017). In the CIKD's view, China has a responsibility to systematically study and theoretically refine its experience for other countries' reference and learning. The CIKD has pledged to translate the Chinese experience into concrete 'knowledge products' (such as research papers on Chinese approaches to industrialisation and infrastructure investment) that contribute Chinese wisdom and solutions to global development challenges. The principal aim of its inaugural flagship program, called 'China's Development Path', was to establish the 'general principles' and 'common values' embedded in the Chinese experience and to 'enrich methodological and path options for developing countries to achieve modernisation' (CIKD n.d.), but it was short of critical reflections on the meaning of modernisation beyond economic growth or the limitations of and 'bumps' in the Chinese path. Unlike ISSCAD, which has a predominantly economic focus, the CIKD takes a multidisciplinary approach—including economics, political science, and sociology—to apprehending broader lessons underlying the Chinese experience that can be shared with the Global South. Its work aligns closely with President Xi's promotion of 'Chinese-style modernisation' at the Twentieth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2022, which will serve as the main driver of China's major policy initiatives for the next five years and beyond (Xinhua 2022).





## Development Knowledge as Power

Essential to the Chinese state apparatus and its demand for policy advice, technical training for developing countries, and international dialogue, Chinese international development studies is now envisaged as generating both theoretical frameworks and applied knowledge that are increasingly framed around the China Model. Studies of foreign aid and development cooperation are particularly relevant to the first two mechanisms. In the 2000s, Chinese expert-scholars insisted on distinguishing Chinese aid as a form of ‘non-interfering cooperation’, of South–South solidarity with win-win benefits, while notions of ‘donor’ and ‘aid’ were still viewed as mischaracterising China’s vision of itself and its relations with the Global South. Few at this stage expressed concerns about the ‘development’ of other peoples and places. With the BRI, however, while the South–South rhetoric continues to be evoked, there appears to be a growing ideological shift among Chinese policymakers and expert-scholars suggesting a transition from the previous hands-off attitude towards a more interventionist approach (Cheng et al. 2022).

### International Development Studies

Figure 1: Subgroups within current Chinese international development studies by transition year, focus area, and key players. Source: Han Cheng.

Such change can be considered a result of China's increasingly embedded presence in the Global South, to the extent that China must 'manage the consequences of success' in what Mawdsley (2019: 259) calls the era of South–South cooperation 3.0. This tension was previously observed in China–Africa relations and has been intensified in wider territories and at finer scales as the BRI unfolds (Cheng et al. 2022). In response, studies of aid and development cooperation are more and more strongly linked to optimising the use of economic means and policy tools to protect overseas interests and pursue power and influence in the Global South, especially in the context of the escalating US–China rivalry. As an anonymous MOFCOM official put it in an interview in 2020: 'Before, however these developing countries were governed internally was none of China's business, but now is different because their unhelpful development models directly affect our interests, forcing China to shape their paths in ways that suit our needs.'

Studies of development theory and social change may be evaluated in closer relation to strategies for achieving soft power or symbolic domination that shapes 'habits of thought, dispositions, and the classification of reality' (Lee 2022: 28). As President Xi (2017b) stated in his address to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP in 2017, China's supposedly unique model is 'blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization ... [and] offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence'. The claim foregrounded fundamental questions about the international order, interstate relations, Third World solidarity, and US–European hegemony. The notion of Chinese development knowledge was further projected on to the developing world when Xi (2017a) declared at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017: 'We are ready to share our development experience with other countries.'

Arguably more than ever before, Chinese international development studies encompasses not only the technical details of how to undertake cooperation, but also the larger question of what kind of society development should strive to create and how to spur this change. For many Chinese expert-scholars, achieving development in the Global South requires multifaceted transformations like those discernible in the contemporary Chinese experience at home. The certainty that history is on 'our' (that is, China's) side pervades recent Chinese elite and popular discourses, as the language of 'miraculous' material improvement expresses an ascending confidence that China has found a unique 'path', as Justin Lin has put it at various conferences and workshops. In this narrative, if provided with 'suitable' (read Chinese) wisdom and solutions, poorer countries can also aspire to a prosperous future, as did China just a few decades ago. While Chinese expert-scholars disagree over specific details of development knowledge, most would identify their work with the overarching cause of establishing the 'general principles' (such as social stability, a strong state, and infrastructure investment) that make development possible for 'latecomers'.

On the other hand, the claim of confidence comes at a moment when many Chinese political and intellectual elites are uncertain about China's changing place in the world, gloomy over the domestic economic outlook, and anxious about growing geopolitical and ideological conflicts with the United States. The promotion of the China Model and a more interventionist approach creates considerable pressure on China's long-held South–South principles, demanding theoretical and moral justification. Various Chinese expert-scholars and institutions have tried to provide one by arguing that the Global South can achieve 'leapfrog development' by 'riding the BRI's fast train' (leaving limited space for critical reflections on the contested processes of 'development' in China and potential ways to do development differently). The metanarrative of Chinese international development studies provides a sense of meaning for China's increasingly assertive geopolitical and geo-economic programs. Examining the rise of a division of social-scientific labour in this light reveals something profound in the emotional tone among Chinese political and intellectual elites about their ways of organising the world and finding China's place in it. ●

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