Discourses on the Rise of China

China’s economic success has long been known. But it was not until the first decade of this century that its economy began to take off, overtaking Japan in 2010 to become the second-largest economy in the world. Part of this success story had to do with the Global South: Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where China has dramatically expanded its trade and investment for the last two decades. This has spawned a debate on whether China is following the post-Cold War US-led new world order or seeking an alternative model. According to *New World Orderings: China and the Global South*, edited by Lisa Rofel and Carlos Rojas, both perspectives are “limited by their reliance on a set of dichotomous views of geopolitics based on a twentieth-century Cold War logic and the new world order discourse with which it was inextricably intertwined” (p. 3). Moreover, they “prioritize economic and diplomatic considerations” (p. 4). Instead, the authors of *New World Orderings* emphasize the processes of worldmaking, or “the centrality of history, culture, and imaginative processes,” by focusing on globalization from below (p. 8). In short, China’s engagements with the Global South should be “viewed as part of a multiple, heterogeneous, and ongoing process of new world orderings” (p. 14). Put differently, the world is moving in different directions, and there is more than one world order still in the making.

This book does cover globalization from above or state-driven initiatives in the first two chapters in part 1. However, “their primary interest is not so much on the strictly political or financial implications of these initiatives, but rather the gaps and disjunctions between the perspectives promoted by these policies, on one hand, and the ways in which these policies actually play out in reality, on the other” (p. 15). Indeed, as Nicolai Volland shows, China tried in the 1960s to rally
Africa behind an anti-US imperialist and anti-Soviet revisionist counterhegemonic struggle but ended in failure. More surprisingly, the policy of seeking solidarity with Africa continued on “the only remaining terrain, the cultural imaginary itself” (p. 33). Besides, it has left an enduring legacy, although it is inherited in a modified form. It is an ambiguous legacy, though, because of China’s world status more in the Global North today. China’s historical experiences in Africa clearly help explain its involvement in the region today. If the past is any guide, people in the West should pay less attention to political speeches and policy statements and should not worry excessively about China’s competition in Africa. The next chapter, by Luciano Damián Bolinaga, is about China’s trade and investment in Latin America. The comparison of the Washington Consensus and the Beijing Consensus is illuminating. The former is driven by a multilateral economic approach, and the latter by a bilateral economic approach. The two differ in form but not in kind. Both favor the stronger side at the expense of local industries. The Beijing Consensus is preferred because it is less interventionist, giving Latin American states more autonomy. But the governments have not done a good job. The critique of local government policies in the chapter is on target. The author may want to go further to discuss whether they can learn from the four Asian tigers, which more successfully navigated the world market.

Part 1 is entitled “Geopolitics and Discourse,” but it is not about power politics per se and how it is talked about. It may leave one to wonder why the editors included topics about a Chinese diaspora (in chapter 3) and modern Chinese literature (in chapter 4). Whatever the case, the chapter on the Chinese diaspora in colonial Tanzania does a good job of analyzing the limitations of the traditional Western colonial perspective and revealing alternative forms of imperialism. According to Derek Sheridan, the colonizer/colonized dichotomy can be applied to the contemporary Belt and Road Initiative, not the Ming Chinese naval expeditions. But the Ming overseas operations were consistent with China’s imperial behavior with neighboring states. The Chinese diaspora cannot be defined as imperial in a European sense but was not innocent through the African lens. It resembled the Indian diaspora, with both communities being hated by the local nationalists. The chapter on Chinese literature, by Ng Kim Chew, employs Immanuel Wallerstein’s core/periphery to describe in passing the marginalization of mainland Chinese literature in world literature despite China’s economic rise. It mainly focuses on a separate distinctive Chinese literature outside of the mainland with its own center. One can call this worldmaking in the literary world. The author mentions a “republic [of letters] without a center and without borders,” implying a decentered literary new world order, which includes other such republics (p. 89).

Part 2 (“Labor and Exchange”) offers perspectives on labor in China, Argentina, and other Latin American nations. The Washington Consensus and the Beijing Consensus continue to resonate in chapter 5, by T. Tu Huynh. As a result of US neoliberal policy, many African male workers lost their jobs and began to compete with women as small-scale traders in Guangzhou. The following chapter by Nellie Chu is about West African and South Korean church leaders in Guangzhou, who also struggled for survival but took comfort in a “prosperity doctrine” and even dreamed of converting China to Christianity. In chapter 7, Rachel Cypher and Lisa Rofel address China’s recent investments in Argentina’s soybean economy from “local, or rather, located, perspectives” (p. 146). Here, “rather than being passive receivers of a Chinese landing, Argentines have a heterogeneity of perspectives: active, thoughtful, receptive, and resistant” (p. 146). Even racism works both ways. What transpired was often a result of negotiation, not one of imposition by an imperial power, although still in a system of asymmetrical relations. Chapter 8, by Andrea Bachner, is about literature and art. It echoes and confirms the worrying con-
ditions of workers covered in earlier chapters. It shows how cultural representations through literary and cinematic works “strategically place under erasure the increasingly precarious economic position Argentina and other Latin American nations find themselves in vis-à-vis China” (p. 16).

What happened to Latin American nations was reflected in more recent Chinese immigration to a newer Chinatown in Johannesburg by victims of privatization in late 1990s China. This is the focus of the first chapter, by Mingwei Huang, in part 3 (“Mobility and Displacement”). The Chinese here were certainly not colonizers. They had to compete with their local counterparts, often to their disadvantage. Racism was an issue as well. The remaining chapters in this part, by Yu-lin Lee, Carlos Rojas, and Shuang Shen respectively, are all about art and literature: cinematic representations of displaced Chinese laborers from Myanmar who lived and worked in various regions of Southeast Asia; “a set of interwoven narratives of homeland and diaspora” (p. 205), especially among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia; and pan-Asian Malaysian Chinese writers of two different generations, influenced by Indian culture and the postcolonial independence movement respectively, who contributed to Sinophone literature in their own ways. All those involved lived or worked across borders. What is covered in the last chapter resonates with the republic of letters mentioned above. The two earlier chapters complicate our understanding of the ways in which overseas Chinese think about homeland and diaspora. They both show that place of birth is more important than ethnic origin. If a Chinese world order is in the making, these overseas Chinese are not likely to be contributors. The same can be said of Chinese immigrants in Johannesburg, who are not very different from small-scale traders in other parts of the Global South.

Worldmaking is a useful concept. It is necessary and even desirable to look at this process from the bottom up simply to better understand it from the top down. However, world ordering is not all equal. The “imaginary processes” by individuals cannot be the same as those by the state. It is true that there are gaps between what the government says and what it does. Yet to stop at that goes against the widespread view that the world economy is central to globalization. In fact, the chapter on the Washington Consensus and the Beijing Consensus is more important than the authors of this book suggest. Without such a top-down perspective, it would be hard to understand globalization from below, which is often a consequence of state-level initiatives. By the same token, it seems more proper to read these historical and cultural perspectives as complementary, not as equally important. The historical accounts help reveal that the Chinese were not strangers to imperial behavior, and they are likely working toward a Chinese world order, but the cultural perspective reminds us that a cultural Chinese world order is not promising.

This book is informative and particularly rich in perspectives. It shows the limitations of the Eurocentric perspective on imperialism and China’s engagements with the Global South. A different, nonconquest form of imperialism qualified not only premodern China but also the Chinese diaspora in Africa to belong to the imperialist camp. Most revealing is that a world order led by either the United States or China will not be much different. Neither will be free of unequal relations, not to mention racial and gender issues. But local governments matter. This book raises the question. It is now up to the leaders in the Global South to meet the challenge.
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