

BOOK REVIEWS

*How China Escaped the Poverty Trap*. By YUEN YUEN ANG. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016. 326 pp. \$37.82 (cloth).

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Yuen Yuen Ang begins her book by framing her research in terms of the infamous chicken or egg question; what helps countries get out of poverty: good governance or economic growth? Ang presents a compelling argument to explain how China developed so quickly, especially given the fact that, before its reforms at the end of the 1970s, the country was poorer than bottom-billion countries are today. She argues that China harnessed its weak institutions to build strong markets and ultimately created the right conditions for adaptation. Her arguments can be encompassed in a complex model which she coins as *directed improvisation*.

According to Ang, the key point that development scholars should grasp when studying China is that their development is *co-evolutionary*. This process involves looking at the sequencing of policies and decision-making over long periods of time, as well as observing the interactions and consequences of these actions between the state and the market. Ang explains that her research views phenomena as *complex* rather than *complicated*. By using a complex approach, scholars are able to see that different components work *together* rather than as isolated pieces that make up an entire system. The author also situates her research in the literature with great precision. Ang dispels all other arguments about China's development, explaining how they view the world as *complicated*. Arguments such as "the Beijing Consensus" or the developmental state only represent static snapshots of specific periods in time. Ang thus ambitiously endorses a method to create a sequence of development, as single snapshots are not generalizable. Through directed improvisation, China's central reformers offered direction, while also allowing just enough flexibility for local authorities to improvise.

Ang crafts a strong narrative through her empirical analysis by gradually building on previous chapters and making concise summaries of her arguments. The first half of her book works at laying the groundwork for her second part, where she delves into case studies. She gives a thick description of directed improvisation, where development strategy focuses on social settings (rather than biological), uncertainty (rather than risk) and making a distinction between exerting influence rather than control (shattering the belief that the latter is associated with authoritarian China). Ang highlights the importance of incremental change in policy reforms and devotes a chapter to explaining how the government runs like a franchised bureaucracy, in which economic results are ultimately favored over social outcomes. Thus, the two key ingredients for China's development have been *adaptation* and *entrepreneurship*, at all levels of government.

Next, Ang turns her attention to specific counties in China that have made use of her directed improvisation model. In the second half of her book the author engages in a bottom-up approach rather than top-down. In order to provide a comprehensive account of her model, Ang's case studies cover the full spectrum of possible cases, ranging from what she calls movers (those who are typically on the coast and develop first) to those who have developed more slowly, whom she calls

laggards. The first case study Ang presents is one that is between the movers and the laggards, that of Forest Hill in Fujian province. Specifically, Forest Hill developed through the coevolution of property rights and markets, and the coevolution of development strategy and markets. Throughout her analysis, Ang points out that the problem with development theories is that they are designed to be universal, when in reality different approaches are needed for different stages of development. She then presents Blessed County (Zhejiang province), which she describes as entrepreneurial and located on the coast. Her contrasting example, that of Humble County in Hubei province is her example of a laggard, being located farther from the coast. Ang notes that although the speed and outcomes at which the two counties have developed differ, their pathways of state-market coevolution are strikingly similar. She points out that laggards will not take the same steps of first movers, because the former face different challenges than those of the latter. These challenges notably include a rise in factors costs, the finite availability of industrial land and the degradation of the environment. However, Ang reminds us that although endowments instinctively play an important role in predicting a locale's potential for development, she argues they are not deterministic.

Ang concludes her effort by examining the coevolution processes during medieval Europe, the antebellum United States and the development of Nollywood in Nigeria. The presentation of these case studies seeks to prove that China's development model is not necessarily unique or unprecedented.

Ang's book, with its demonstration of how the state and the market interact with each other, is an exemplary model of political economy research. Her final product is ambitious in claiming that political and economic phenomena are not complicated, but rather complex, in that a single explanatory variable cannot comprehensively address China's development narrative. In some ways, her approach challenges conventional thinking, in that social scientists strive to demonstrate that one variable can explain a certain outcome, and the argument is presented in a way that construes their argument as superior to others. Instead, Ang argues that it is not the single variable development scholars need to look at, but rather the *interaction* between variables.

This book leaves the development community with a number of more normative questions for development studies. Can we achieve directed improvisation in other countries without authoritarianism? If not, would these countries succeed without drawing criticism from Western governments? Ang's book will prove to be an influential book in the years to come, for both its findings and research methodology.

*The Board of Rites and the Making of Qing China.* By MACABE KELIHER. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 288 pp. \$80 (cloth).

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To discuss early Qing history, this book focuses on “the symbolic practices that structured domination and legitimized authority” in the Qing court instead of the usual discussions of war-making and bureaucracy (p. 5). Keliher refers to the symbolic practices as ritual or rites, and argues that the Board of Rites systemized them to increase the domination and legitimacy of the Qing emperor in the process of Qing state-formation in the seventeenth century.

One of the characteristics of the Sinocentric world was its ritual-based world order, called *li*. The concept of *li* is not limited to ritual. It is a much more complicated term that extended into interpersonal relationships to control “behavioral practices, administrative norms, and sumptuary”