

(IIC Kamaladevi Complex, Seminar Room II, 3 pm 10 January 2018)

[PM ABV once asked me when I was in Delhi from Beijing how China had made such a “*challang*” or leap forward. I wish I had this book to hand when I fumbled for an answer.]

This is a book that I would **recommend without hesitation** to anyone interested in China and her development experience. For those who worry about **China-watching in India**, this book proves that it **is alive and well**, and extends beyond geopolitics, military calculation and the purely commercial. This is **an effort to understand the complex reality that is China** from a development point of view.

1. Its **basic thesis** describes how China has been so **successful in growing** her economy, and equally, to identify the **consequences** of the pattern of development that China chose — the **inequality, distress migration, and environmental degradation**. There is separate chapter on the **gender** consequences. It argues that for China **success itself has become a trap**, and that she cannot change the pattern of her development or address many of these problems because China and her elite are now **so integrated into the global capitalist process**, and because of the nature of the Chinese party and state system (p 24).
2. For me the **value of the book** lies in three aspects:
  - It is written from **an Indian perspective**, and makes explicit and implicit comparisons between the Indian and Chinese development experiences. The **resonances**, and the divergences, are quite striking. There is **similarity in the problems** that reform has thrown up in both countries. **Neither seems to have found politically acceptable solutions** to those problems yet. There is also a noticeable **similarity in the sort of authoritarian leadership** that those problems have brought to power in both countries. Contrary to the general impression, **China has pulled away from India even more in the human development indicators** than in raw measures of brute economic power reflected in GDP figures and economic size (p 7). This is significant for the future. At the same time, in both countries the era of easy reform is over, and future development is highly dependent on the path already followed for the last thirty years. Indeed, one is left with the impression that it **will take nothing short of a cataclysm**, or another Cultural Revolution, **for China to get out of the success trap** that Mohanty describes. **Mohanty** takes a more **optimistic** view of the future than I do. He is **confident** that “China’s leadership will continue to attend to those problems creatively and confidently” (p 350). But that goes against his argument about the structural and other factors that constitute the “success trap” that he has identified earlier in the book.
  - Secondly, the book is based on years of **field work in Wuxi** and **combines consideration of the central with that of the local/county/township (or xian) level**. This is valuable, for it is easy to ignore the practical local effect of central policy, most of which is declaratory, and not necessarily effective in practice, something that the Chinese system finds very difficult to admit. (An example in point is the set of wide-ranging market-oriented economic reforms that were decided at the third plenum of the 18th CC in 2013, very few of which have been implemented in practice.) Though I must say that this is not the most successful part of the book from my point of view for it is not clear to me how central policy actually translates into actions in Wuxi, or how what happens at the local level affects or changes central policy.

- The third aspect that I found of interest is the **idea of China's development as a model** for other developing countries, something that President Xi Jinping spoke of at the 19th party congress in October 2017. Xi is the first Chinese leader since Mao to offer China as a model to other countries, this time not of revolution but of development. We have recently seen several references by Chinese officials and publications about the Chinese model or method (zhongguo fangan, 中國方案) which is variously translated in the official Chinese media. Mohanty has a chapter (chapter 10) on this question. This is an issue that deserves to be considered in considerable detail. On the face of it, there is no other country with China's characteristics, resource endowment etc, and the conditions that made China's spectacular growth spurt in the decades after 1992 possible will never be replicated. It is therefore **hard to see how China's development could be a model for anyone else**.

3. All in all, this is a **relatively objective account of the Chinese development experience** — relative because there are very few absolutes in this field that one can be sure of, not the figures or even the meaning of the words that are used to describe China's economy. Unlike western accounts of China, which now accept today's Chinese line suggesting that all development has been the result of Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping, and treats the decade before 2012 as the "lost decade", **Mohanty gives credit where it is due to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao** who recognised the social and economic problems and imbalances that reform had thrown up and began the process of addressing them.
4. If I have a criticism of the book it is that it **reposes considerable faith in** the wisdom and leadership of the CCP, and in what it describes as a "**worldwide upsurge of democratic consciousness** on the part of groups, regions and individuals".... "Hence there has been a continuing resistance to imperialism, neocolonialism, and all forms of domination" (p 18). If so, this is a remarkably well kept secret, and not very effective. The resistance is certainly not from China. As the book notes slightly later, "**Globally the Chinese seem to be more interested in preserving the existing unequal, unjust, world economic and financial order**, out of which they have benefitted greatly" (p 23), and "the forces of the market economy have trumped the elements of socialism" (p 20).
5. My own view is slightly different. **If China were so well integrated** into "the global capitalist process" the **US would be able to hand over the baton** of capitalist hegemon, or to share that role with China as Britain did with the US in the mid-20th century. In my view, **China today seeks to remake the international order in her own favour** rather than to preserve the existing order, no matter how well it may have served her.
6. I would also have liked a little more about **how China's domestic developments translate into the changed Chinese behaviour abroad** that we have seen since the 2008 economic crisis. What are the domestic drivers of Chinese foreign policy? Is there a connection between the pattern of development and the foreign policy that it leads to? For instance, does the reliance on state-owned enterprises in China or on Zaibatsu in Meiji Japan result in certain foreign policy compulsions and behaviours? But here I am just indulging my own interests, provoked by reading this fine book.
7. One last point. I have long been struck by **repetitive patterns in China watching**. The **initial reactions** of most China watchers, particularly academic China watchers, to major developments in the PRC — from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution to the anti-corruption campaign and the Belt and Road Initiative — is **uncritical admiration and acceptance** of official explanations at face value. They **ignore ideological incoherence**, logical inconsistency, and the lack of linkage between declared policy

and practical reality — things that they would never accept in their own societies. To some extent this is a result of **the description trap**, of the attempt by China watchers to describe what they see or know, which is largely what the Chinese state wishes them to see and know. This is understandable. What is less understandable is why, when the **next, inevitable turn of the political wheel** comes in China, China watchers display the **same uncritical acceptance** of the new verdict and version of history — whether on the GPCR, or on Hu Jintao’s so-called “lost decade” (which was far from that), and so on. A mythical people is sometimes invoked to justify each shift, without ever asking the people themselves what they think. Those who apply normal standards of academic rigour and scepticism to developments in China have their motives or origins questioned and are condemned as irretrievably anti-Chinese. This effectively **divides the community into panda-huggers and China-baiters**, and leaves **little place for real scholarship on China**. The problem is now compounded by China’s integration into the global market. For instance, the **BRI** is a commercial and economic opportunity for most and is therefore raised to holy cow status, with little real examination of its costs, benefits, returns and consequences in practice. I wish I had an answer to this problem, but I do not. I raise it in the hope that someone else will find a solution.