

Manoranjan Mohanty, *China's Transformation: The Success Story and the Success Trap*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2018. 376 pp. ISBN 978-93-866-0284-8.

'Asia is becoming one', says Japanese scholar Tanaka Akihiko. Indeed, recent decades have seen much optimism about Asian solidarity and collective Asian renaissance and resurgence, with the primary powers – Japan, Eurasian Russia, China and India – as strong movers and stakeholders. A decade ago Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe re-articulated the idea of the seventeenth-century Indian Emperor Dara Shikoh (the son of the emperor who built the Taj Mahal) expressed in the treatise 'Majma-ul-Bahrain' or the 'Confluence of the Two Seas' to visualize an inevitable rise of the Indian and Pacific Oceans as twin seas of prosperity. Paradoxically, despite such optimism 'Asia still isn't there yet'.

Nothing mirrors the complexities and the paradox of Asian relationships better than that playing out between two of Asia's most populous powers, China and India, with their combined population of 2.7 billion or 40 per cent of the global population.

Post-war or post-1962 Sino-Indian relations have been rocky, with China practically a pariah in India (and vice versa), until the normalization of relations in 1988. In the decades of political hostility, underscored by a severe 'trust deficit', only a very small circle of thinkers, philosophers, activists and political scientists in India engaged in Chinese studies. In 1969, a small, informal China Study Group met on the lawns of an iconic and beloved Delhi landmark, the red and white Sapru House in the centre of the city.

This circle, which the eminent Indian political scientist Rajani Kothari affectionately called the 'China Tribe', over the years included the diplomat-turned-academic Mira-Sinha Bhattacharjea, the noted Indian-Chinese thinker Tan Chung (the son of Tan Yun-Shan, the founder of India's first institution for Chinese Studies, Cheena Bhavan [China House] in 1921, established under the auspices of Asia's first Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore), legendary left-wing playwright known by his acronym GPD, the iconic historian Giri Deshingkar, the Indian-Australian sociologist Patricia Uberoi (the inspiration and subject of the documentary *My Mother India*, 2003) – intellectual heavyweights glued together by the 'core' (in the Deng Xiaoping sense of the term) figure of the left-wing political scientist Manoranjan Mohanty, a key player in Chinese Studies in post-Nehruvian India.

Mohanty is much more than a China-hand though and needs little introduction. A prominent intellectual, Mohanty has been at the

forefront of 'decolonizing knowledge', refusing to accept being Third World 'comprador academia'. Since the 1960s, Mohanty has questioned the dominant Anglo-Saxon/Eurocentric narrative and rallied for an understanding from the vantage point of the Third World and the Indian eye. He has spent decades supporting civil liberties and social justice, in theory and practice. In Chinese Studies, Mohanty democratized the field, encouraging scholars in small, nondescript towns and Tier-3 cities to look at China. Today, a large number of non-English-speaking (non-elite) scholars fluent in dialect/regional language have taken to Chinese Studies and made China accessible to small-towners.

The book in question, *China's Transformation: The Success Story and the Success Trap*, stems from Mohanty's long engagement with China. In 1979, Mohanty began charting the trajectory of a mid-range commune called Hela (as pronounced in Wuxi dialect; Helie in pinyin) south of the Yangtze in Wuxi (Jiangsu province). Then, Hela was made up of rice-fields and green pastures punctuated by peach trees, its southern and western borders formed by Lake Taihu.

Then to now has been a big leap: Hela's rice-fields have given way to a diversified economy, township and village enterprises (TVEs) regrouped to take advantage of scale, and the peach-trees have given way to multi-storied blocks. In four decades, Mohanty witnessed the rise of the 10,000-yuan families (*wanyuan hu*) and down the years they became passé with the emergence of hundred-million yuan families (*wanwanhu*) – the stratification of the peasantry.

Mohanty's chronicle of Hela from a people's commune to a township (*xiang*) in 1983, a town (*zhen*) in 1999, to a regular unit of a metropolitan district street (*jiedao*) of Wuxi in 2004, a 'suburb with urban characteristics', provides a portrait of transformation at the local level. In Hela in 1979, 80 per cent of the workforce was engaged in agriculture and sideline production. In 2004, less than 10 per cent was engaged in the primary industry with more than 60 per cent and 20 per cent in the secondary and tertiary industry, as was the expectation of a socialist market economy.

The local level 'emancipating its mind' led to some unanticipated, if amusing, consequences: in Qingxin village (Hela township) a bankrupt soda factory became an alcohol factory; and a humble fish brigade came to be renamed as Lihong village and became a commercial venture linking with Australia and Singapore.

Hela's diversification of the economy, access to technology and capital, its urban grid of resident's committees and social sector achievements

(family planning, infant mortality) are notable, with but so were the problems that arose. Indeed, the dramatic diversification of the economy where Hela's ponds, rivers and rivulets flowed into Lake Taihu provides a chance insight into the environmental crises of the 2000s. Lake Taihu turned blue-green because of the infestation of a toxic cyanobacteria, owing to pollution.

The above provides a valuable window through which to view the complexities of transformation in China. Mohanty lauds Hela's success, no doubt, yet makes a case to see Hela 'by daylight' – particularly the contradictions in Hela's success story.

To him, Hela appears a victim of its own success, ensconced in a leitmotif of market economy, in a 'success trap' that makes it hard for it to extricate itself from the momentum of reforms to address deeper questions of inequalities and inequities. A common refrain that Mohanty frequently encountered was 'the Party did not know what to do about the problems!' (p. 3).

Mohanty's macro and micro level analysis highlights several key areas including the agency of the local state, party structure, the role of TVEs, women and education to understand their limitations – what was stopping them.

Mohanty suggests that a gap between theory and practice became inevitable. A separation of powers (party, government and enterprise) existed in theory, but not in practice at Hela. Autonomy was feted in theory, but as Mohanty notes from the change in the party structure, '[i]t was no longer the earlier situation of the party-led mass organizations, the trade union, peasant association, youth league and women's federation; while peasant associations disappeared after the commune period, the other three continued to exist. But they were wings of the party and not autonomous organizations' (p. 191). Mohanty concedes that centralized leadership brought some success, but 'its authoritarian character which is functional and effective cannot be changed' (p. 142).

According to Mohanty, Hela's growth story reflected the larger pattern of China's story, a story rooted in the premises of the European Industrial Revolution, 'a path of urbanization and migration of the rural population to cities' (p. 199) which disregarded making the rural 'units of self-governance'. The compulsion to continued economic success posits a dilemma – the inability to step aside from socio-political forces in order to address development with equity and sustainability. This is what he calls 'success trap'.

From Hela, Mohanty points to another area of concern – namely, declin-

ing public action. He indicates the need for public action in community health, the site of another paradox – the proliferation of private hospitals but at the cost of the neglect of local-level health infrastructure. Similarly, declining investment in education has to be complemented by future reforms to make it 'accessible, free, balanced and compulsory' (p. 347).

What makes the book helpful to scholars studying India and China is Mohanty's comparative perspective with respect to inequality and human development in India and China, and also the local level experience in China compared with India's units of self-governance, *panchayats*.

Of course, Hela per se – developed, eastern coast China – has its pitfalls, but Hela came to Mohanty, instead of Mohanty choosing Hela. This was in times and climes when Sino-Indian relations had not normalized and relations were moving, as Mohanty says, 'at a snail's pace' (p. 88). That cloud has long hung over the field.

The book would have benefitted from a more careful edit and proof-read to avoid faulty transliteration – for example neighbourhood committees as *zhumin weiyuanhui* instead of *jumin weiyuanhui*, production brigade and team as *shengcan dadui* instead of *shengchan dadui*, small group as *ziao zu* instead of *xiao zu*. The glossary, however, is accurate. But to focus on these slips would be mistaking the woods for the trees. Unfortunately, Mohanty's rich body of works (in Odiya) are not yet accessible to the average Western reader.

Mohanty, the doyen of Chinese Studies in India, is revealed to be a little older and a lot disillusioned with the promise of China that had heralded an alternative vision and outlook. To him, China shows the familiar fault-lines of the capitalist Industrial Revolution. While Mohanty takes cognizance of China's success, yet it is a case of 'revolution delayed'. In a world fascinated by the temporal, Mohanty takes a long view and strikes a cautionary note to understand the broader China success story in the socio-political context and economic context of income inequalities, social inequities and environmental degradation. Clearly, as Mohanty suggests, backtracking on a model, 'getting off the tiger' that is proving successful is not easy and comes a 'success trap'.

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