

# From "internationalism" to the Global Development Initiative: paradigm transformation and path reconstruction of China's foreign aid

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**Abstract.** Over more than seventy years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, foreign aid has evolved from an instrument of revolutionary diplomacy into a key arena of global development governance. Yet the dramatic expansion in scale has not been accompanied by a smooth replacement of underlying institutional logics. China continues to identify itself as part of "South–South cooperation," while in practice exhibiting the characteristics of a major aid provider. The establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency marked an institutional effort to strengthen strategic coordination, but bureaucratic fragmentation and entrenched project-oriented implementation practices remain highly resilient. Drawing on historical institutionalism, this study conceptualizes the evolution of China's foreign aid as a process of institutional change shaped jointly by critical junctures and path dependence. The analysis shows that China's foreign aid regime has undergone three paradigm transformations, each unfolding through institutional layering rather than paradigm displacement. The core challenge today lies in structural imbalance arising from the coexistence of old and new institutional logics, manifested in three interrelated paradoxes: the misalignment between discourse and identity, the tension between coordination and efficiency, and the pull between securitization and development orientation. Moving beyond this phase of institutional layering requires, at the strategic level, elevating foreign aid from a project-based instrument to a mechanism for the provision of global public goods; at the institutional level, advancing rule-based governance through the enactment of a Foreign Aid Law; and at the discursive level, shifting from defensive rhetoric toward alternative normative frameworks such as "Development Effectiveness 2.0."

**Keywords:** foreign aid, historical institutionalism, paradigm transformation, path dependence, Global Development Initiative

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## 1. Introduction

Over more than seventy years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, foreign aid has remained an integral component of China's diplomatic strategy. In terms of scale, institutional actors, and operational modalities, it has undergone a profound transformation, emerging as one of the most dynamic forces in the field of global development cooperation. Yet a paradox persists. As China seeks to embed itself more deeply

within the international development system under the identity of "one of the world's largest providers of development finance," its aid practices frequently encounter what may be described as a "cognitive misalignment" in areas such as discursive framing, institutional coordination, and evaluative standards. On the one hand, China continues to position itself within the framework of South–South cooperation and resists being classified as a traditional donor country. On the other hand, the rapid expansion in aid volume and the intensification of geopolitical competition have subjected China to sustained international scrutiny regarding rule alignment, debt transparency, and governance effectiveness. This structural tension between identity and practice constitutes the central problem consciousness from which this study proceeds.

Existing scholarship has largely approached China's foreign aid from the perspectives of diplomatic history or international relations motivations, systematically tracing its developmental stages and political logic. However, relatively little attention has been paid to a more fundamental set of questions: Why has China's foreign aid system evolved along its current trajectory? What developmental rationales and institutional logics underpin the formation of its aid model? More importantly, why does friction arise between institutional inertia and emerging practical demands during periods of paradigm transition, and how should this tension be understood? To address these questions, this study adopts the analytical framework of historical institutionalism, conceptualizing the evolution of China's foreign aid as a process of institutional change jointly shaped by critical junctures and path dependence [1].

Historical institutionalism emphasizes that institutional evolution does not result from smooth, rational design. Rather, it is deeply embedded in specific historical and temporal contexts and shaped by the interaction of critical junctures, path dependence, and unintended consequences [2]. Viewed through the lens of several key turning points, the evolution of China's foreign aid can be divided into three principal institutional stages: the period of revolutionary internationalism, the period of development-oriented mutual benefit, and the period of global developmentalism [3]. Each transition corresponded to a fundamental reorientation of national strategic priorities. At the same time, these institutional arrangements—while often appearing efficient—have also generated strong path-dependent effects. The project-based management model administered by the Ministry of Commerce provides a telling example. In the early years of reform and opening up, its standardized systems of competitive bidding and engineering acceptance significantly enhanced aid efficiency and laid the institutional foundation for China's early overseas infrastructure expansion. However, as the global development agenda has shifted beyond infrastructure toward more complex and multidimensional challenges such as climate change and public health, this engineering-centered framework has revealed its limitations. Coordination costs among government agencies have risen sharply, and the system has struggled to adapt to an increasingly complex external environment. A similar complexity surrounds the long-standing principle of "non-conditionality," which has served as a defining marker of China's South–South cooperation identity. Historically, this principle played an important role in safeguarding the sovereignty of recipient countries. Today, however, in the context of international debates on debt sustainability and governance effectiveness, it has come under growing pressure. Its emphasis on political non-interference has not fully addressed external concerns regarding the efficiency of fund utilization and the long-term developmental impact of aid projects.

## **2. Historical trajectory: three institutional stages**

### **2.1. The period of revolutionary internationalism (1949–1978)**

This stage marks the formative phase of China's foreign aid system. To grasp the logic underpinning aid during this period, one must return to the historical context of the early Cold War. The newly founded People's

Republic of China faced diplomatic isolation and acute security pressures. Against this backdrop, foreign aid was never conceived as a purely economic undertaking; from the outset, it functioned as a highly politicized instrument of diplomacy. At the 1955 Bandung Conference, Premier Zhou Enlai articulated the "Eight Principles for Economic and Technical Assistance to Other Countries." In particular, the commitments to "equality and mutual benefit" and to providing assistance "without any conditions attached" responded directly to the geopolitical realities of the time. These principles rejected Western colonial-style aid practices and helped the new Chinese state secure trust and recognition among Asian and African countries. Their discursive influence has endured, continuing to serve as a foundational normative code in China's contemporary South–South cooperation narrative.

If the Bandung Conference established the ideological framework of China's aid policy, the institutional form of the system took shape through a series of large-scale aid projects from the 1950s to the 1970s. Support for Vietnam during its resistance against France, assistance to Arab states during regional conflicts, and the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway were emblematic undertakings. These projects involved investments of hundreds of millions of yuan, extended construction timelines, and little expectation of direct economic return. Under the impetus of such politically defined missions, a highly centralized and administratively mobilized operational model gradually emerged. Decision-making authority was concentrated at the highest levels of the central leadership, with major aid commitments often approved directly by top state leaders, bypassing complex routine bureaucratic procedures. Implementation relied heavily on the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade (and its institutional predecessors), which temporarily seconded personnel from various ministries to form quasi–command headquarters resembling wartime mobilization structures. Within this framework, political returns constituted the primary evaluative criterion; economic profitability, debt risk, and even the recipient country's absorptive capacity were treated as secondary considerations. This institutional prototype developed in tandem with the planned economy system of the time. In landmark projects such as the Tanzania–Zambia Railway, it demonstrated extraordinary mobilizational capacity and execution efficiency: tens of thousands of Chinese workers laid tracks and built bridges across unfamiliar terrain, backed by the coordinated functioning of the entire state apparatus. Yet the very logic of calculating a "political account" without regard to cost—while generating moral capital for South–South solidarity—also entrenched a powerful path-dependent dynamic. Over time, it became not only an institutional habit but also a psychological threshold that later reforms would find difficult to transcend.

## 2.2. The period of development-oriented mutual benefit (1979–2012)

This period represents a fundamental rupture in the trajectory of China's foreign aid. With the launch of reform and opening up, the central leadership began to reassess the premises underlying aid policy, focusing on two core questions. First, at a time when the national economy stood on the brink of collapse, could China continue to sustain commitments that were effectively unconditional and open-ended? Second, might foreign aid be transformed from a unilateral fiscal burden into a policy instrument serving domestic economic construction? In 1983, the State Council introduced a new guiding principle—"equality and mutual benefit, emphasis on practical results, diversified forms, and common development." The formal incorporation of "mutual benefit" into the core policy language marked more than a rhetorical adjustment. It signaled a recalibration of priorities: economic rationality was no longer subordinate to political symbolism but began to assume coequal status.

The most consequential institutional transformation occurred at the level of financing mechanisms. In 1993, the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade established a foreign aid fund. Two years later, in 1995, the government comprehensively introduced concessional loans with interest subsidies. As a result, the

proportion of outright grants declined significantly. Substantively, this shift redefined foreign aid from a form of "fiscal expenditure" into an instrument of "policy-based finance." Market actors—including the Export-Import Bank of China and engineering contracting enterprises—were progressively integrated into what had previously been an administratively monopolized aid chain. Commercial logics such as credit risk assessment and cost-benefit analysis began to influence which projects would ultimately materialize. Institutional authority also shifted. Administrative responsibility for foreign aid gradually tilted from the diplomatic apparatus toward the commerce system. The establishment of the Department of Foreign Aid within the Ministry of Commerce in 2003 marked the consolidation of a professionalized bureaucratic structure centered on project management.

If the period of revolutionary internationalism laid the institutional foundations of China's aid system, this phase constituted a thorough process of disenchantment. Reform and opening up compelled China to confront a difficult question: were cost-insensitive aid commitments expressions of principled internationalism, or unsustainable liabilities? The 1983 policy formula appeared modest, yet it opened the way for a structural transformation in aid logic. For the first time, economic efficiency became an explicit evaluative standard. Nevertheless, this transformation did not dismantle the earlier institutional template. Rather, it layered new economic criteria onto an existing framework of political mobilization. The principle of non-conditionality remained intact. What emerged was a hybrid regime: economic efficiency was embedded within, rather than substituted for, the prior political logic. Over the following two decades, this layered system demonstrated remarkable operational effectiveness. It facilitated China's rise as one of the world's largest exporters of infrastructure development. At the same time, it planted the seeds of future tension. As aid became increasingly synonymous with engineering delivery, issues such as debt sustainability and governance evaluation remained institutionally peripheral. The structural contradictions that would define the next stage were already taking shape beneath the surface.

### 2.3. The period of global developmentalism (2013–present)

The introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 marked the third critical juncture in the evolution of China's foreign aid system. Unlike the previous two transformations, which were driven primarily by internal crises, this shift reflected a form of strategic anticipation. China began to move consciously from the position of a passive rule-taker to that of an active agenda-setter. This transition in identity quickly exposed the structural limitations of the existing aid regime.

The Belt and Road Initiative imposed three unprecedented pressures on the foreign aid system. First, at the level of scale, the flow and deployment of hundreds of billions of dollars in financing far exceeded the administrative capacity of existing aid management structures. Second, at the level of functional scope, aid expanded rapidly beyond traditional infrastructure into areas such as public health, digital connectivity, and climate change. The technical expertise embedded in the Ministry of Commerce's project-engineering framework proved insufficient to address these increasingly multidimensional development challenges. Third, at the level of discourse, China began systematically advancing new international concepts, including the vision of a "community with a shared future for mankind" and the Global Development Initiative [4]. Yet in practice, aid implementation continued to rely on defensive narratives such as "non-conditionality," creating a visible gap between China's expanding strategic ambitions and the discursive framework through which its aid was articulated.

The establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in 2018 represented an institutional response to these mounting pressures. At the level of top-level design, its creation conveyed at least three important signals. First, the appointment of a State Councilor-rank official as its

director endowed the agency with cross-ministerial coordinating authority, elevating aid decision-making from fragmented bureaucratic bargaining to a direct expression of national strategic intent. Second, the shift away from exclusive management under the Ministry of Commerce signaled the reintegration of foreign aid into the core of diplomatic strategy, reanchoring development cooperation within China's broader foreign policy agenda rather than treating it solely as an instrument of economic and technical cooperation. Third, it indicated a gradual conceptual transition—from a particularistic framework emphasizing the distinctive features of South–South cooperation toward a more universalistic orientation centered on the provision of global public goods.

Yet this paradigm transformation remains incomplete. CIDCA's current mandate is focused primarily on strategic planning and interagency coordination, while the execution of specific aid projects continues to depend on established institutional channels within the Ministry of Commerce, the National Health Commission, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, and other sectoral bodies. This configuration—an institution with expansive strategic responsibilities but limited operational capacity—creates a structural tension between its formal positioning and its practical authority. As a strategic command center, CIDCA has yet to develop its own fully independent implementation apparatus. More fundamentally, the emerging institutional order has been layered onto, rather than substituted for, the preexisting system [2]. Project execution still relies heavily on long-standing bureaucratic networks. This has produced a revealing institutional duality. On the desks of the new agency lie policy blueprints and evaluation frameworks oriented toward strategic coordination and long-term planning, while within the older system, established procedures governing project appraisal, contractor selection, and fund disbursement continue to operate with undiminished momentum. The path-dependent structures formed over the past four decades—anchored in organizational inertia and entrenched interest configurations—cannot be dismantled simply through the creation of a new administrative entity. For the first time in the history of China's foreign aid regime, a period of dual institutional cores has emerged. The old track cannot be abruptly halted, yet the new track remains only partially constructed. All actors operate within this transitional zone of institutional layering, where competing logics coexist and interact. It is precisely this structural imbalance that defines the contemporary starting point for any serious analysis of China's foreign aid system.

### **3. Institutional layering: three dimensions of paradigmatic tension**

Historical institutionalism reminds us that institutional rupture and reconstruction rarely occur as abrupt substitutions. Instead, they unfold through prolonged periods of entanglement, during which new rules attach themselves to old frameworks, legacy logics persist within newly created functions, and institutional actors adapt strategically to overlapping and sometimes contradictory mandates. China's foreign aid system is currently situated within precisely such a phase of institutional layering. The structural imbalance of this transitional period manifests most clearly in three deeply interconnected tensions.

The first tension lies in the misalignment between discourse and identity. China has consistently maintained a structural critique of Western aid paradigms, with the defining marker of its South–South cooperation identity being the principle of "non-conditionality." Textual analyses of China's foreign aid white papers conducted by Korean scholars have revealed a notable disjunction between national identity and national interest. While China continues to frame itself discursively as a developing country, its policy practices increasingly reflect the strategic interests and operational scale of a major power. This disjuncture, though not without internal logic, introduces diplomatic complexities. At the same time, the scale and influence of China's aid have undergone a qualitative transformation. In regions such as Africa and Southeast

Asia, China has emerged as one of the foremost financiers of infrastructure development. Yet the long-standing principle of "acting within one's capacity" now sits uneasily alongside growing international expectations that scale entails responsibility. Western media narratives have frequently portrayed China as an "opaque creditor" and a "rule-evading actor." Research from the Asia Society Policy Institute highlights a fundamental divergence between Chinese and American development cooperation paradigms: whereas U.S. aid emphasizes democratization, governance reform, and poverty reduction, China defines its engagement as international development cooperation rooted in South–South partnership and mutual benefit. More fundamentally, China has yet to articulate a fully developed normative framework capable of standing alongside established Western aid paradigms as a coherent alternative. Studies of China's overseas medical assistance, for example, suggest that prevailing narratives remain predominantly monologic, emphasizing the technical expertise and humanitarian contributions of Chinese doctors while marginalizing the agency and perspectives of recipient communities. This narrative asymmetry limits the potential for deeper mutual recognition and underscores the need for a more dialogic, polyphonic narrative framework [5]. At its core, the principle of "non-conditionality" represents a negative stance rather than a constructive institutional blueprint. It clearly defines what China rejects but does not fully articulate the mechanisms through which its vision of development effectiveness is to be realized. As a result, discursive innovation has lagged behind practical expansion. China's foreign aid practices have evolved rapidly, yet the conceptual and normative vocabulary through which they are articulated remains comparatively underdeveloped, often placing China in a reactive rather than agenda-setting position within global development discourse.

The second tension lies in the dilemma between coordination and efficiency. If discursive misalignment concerns how China explains its aid, the coordination dilemma speaks directly to how aid is implemented. China's foreign aid governance structure is frequently described in the literature as "pluralistic and decentralized." While analytically neutral, this characterization masks tangible operational frictions. Following the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency in 2018, centralized planning functions were formally strengthened. Yet the underlying implementation architecture remained largely unchanged. The Bureau of International Economic Cooperation within the Ministry of Commerce continues to oversee the tendering and supervision of turnkey aid projects. The International Health Exchange and Cooperation Center under the National Health Commission remains responsible for the selection and deployment of overseas medical teams. At the operational level, project execution still relies heavily on Chinese embassies' economic and commercial offices and on the overseas branches of state-owned enterprises. Scholarly assessments of this implementation system point to several persistent challenges, including incomplete regulatory frameworks, high interagency coordination costs, and uneven implementation effectiveness. These problems stem from a combination of institutional fragmentation, legal underdevelopment, and human resource constraints [6]. The result is a structural mismatch between strategic priorities and resource allocation. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and CIDCA tend to prioritize aid toward regions of geopolitical importance, the Ministry of Commerce's project-generation logic remains driven by market-oriented procurement processes structured around competitive bidding, contract award, and project delivery. These differing selection logics introduce inherent tensions between diplomatic strategy and operational execution. At the same time, the thematic expansion of development cooperation has outpaced the growth of specialized administrative capacity. Emerging domains such as climate governance and digital cooperation have become central pillars of aid strategy, yet the technical bureaucratic infrastructure necessary to support these initiatives remains underdeveloped. Scholars have accordingly emphasized the need to strengthen technical expertise, enhance project management capabilities, and improve China's discursive influence in global development governance [7]. Another less visible but equally consequential challenge lies

in the mismatch between country-specific diversity and standardized operational models. Regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands differ profoundly in terms of economic conditions, governance structures, and development trajectories. Yet China's project-generation mechanisms remain highly standardized. While this standardization enhances efficiency, it often limits the ability of aid programs to integrate deeply into local development ecosystems. The lack of differentiated, context-sensitive program design reflects not merely technical limitations but also the persistence of institutional inertia. Ultimately, these coordination challenges do not stem from insufficient effort on the part of individual actors. Rather, they arise from the structural constraints of an institutional architecture originally designed for a different historical context. When inherited institutional logics encounter novel strategic environments, friction becomes structurally inevitable.

The third tension lies in the tug-of-war between prioritizing security and pursuing development. As strategic competition between China and the United States has expanded across the Global South, development assistance has increasingly become entangled with broader geopolitical dynamics. Scholars have introduced the concept of "security hybridity" to describe how many countries simultaneously engage in security cooperation with both powers, albeit in distinct ways. The United States primarily provides regional security public goods aimed at countering external threats, while China's engagement often emphasizes domestic stability, infrastructure protection, and state capacity enhancement [8]. Media narratives in regions such as the Pacific Islands, Latin America, and Southeast Asia increasingly frame development assistance through the lens of strategic rivalry, portraying an intensifying "aid competition" between major powers. Western strategic discourse frequently interprets the Belt and Road Initiative as an instrument of geopolitical expansion. This shifting external environment exerts profound pressure on China's aid system. On one hand, securitization pressures may incentivize policymakers to direct aid toward geopolitically strategic partner states, even when those countries may not represent the most urgent development priorities or the most conducive governance environments. On the other hand, persistent external criticisms—centered on concerns such as "debt traps" and financial opacity—have fostered growing caution within implementation agencies. Project approval processes have lengthened, risk-avoidance tendencies have intensified, and institutional behavior has become more conservative. This trend creates a structural tension with the traditional ethos of Chinese aid, which emphasizes responsiveness to recipient countries' immediate development needs. At a deeper level, this dynamic raises a fundamental question: as China's foreign aid becomes increasingly interpreted through the lens of major power competition, can it sustain the moral and political narrative of shared development that underpins its South–South cooperation framework?

It is important to emphasize, however, that the identification of these three tensions should not lead to institutional pessimism. Periods of institutional layering, while marked by friction and imbalance, also represent moments of exceptional plasticity and transformative potential. Historical institutionalism suggests that paradigm transformation becomes possible when three conditions converge: crises or structural pressures open windows of opportunity, viable alternative institutional models emerge through sustained policy experimentation, and coalitions of key actors coalesce to support reform. Viewed through this analytical lens, the reconstruction of China's foreign aid paradigm must proceed simultaneously across strategic, institutional, and discursive dimensions. The challenge is not merely to respond to external pressures but to undertake a deeper process of institutional self-reflection, redefining the normative foundations and operational architecture of China's role in global development governance.

#### **4. Normative transformation and institutional reconstruction**

The core of strategic reconstruction lies in elevating foreign aid from a "project-based instrument" to a "global public goods provision mechanism." This shift entails moving beyond a fragmented collection of individual projects toward the creation of a coherent institutional system. In practical terms, it requires not only exporting infrastructure, but also transmitting development frameworks; not only addressing immediate bottlenecks, but also strengthening recipient countries' endogenous capacity for long-term planning and autonomous development. Recent scholarship from researchers at China Agricultural University argues that traditional Western aid has fallen into a "development paradox": rather than fostering sustained economic growth, aid has often deepened external dependency and weakened recipient countries' developmental autonomy [9]. This diagnosis highlights the structural limitations of a purely project-oriented model. Against this backdrop, several strategic adjustments become imperative. First, global challenges such as climate change, public health governance, and digital inclusion should be formally integrated into the core strategic agenda of foreign aid, thereby correcting the long-standing structural imbalance in which hard infrastructure has overshadowed institutional and human capacity development. Second, aid planning must be systematically aligned with recipient countries' national development strategies, ensuring that aid programs are embedded within local policy priorities and budgetary cycles rather than operating as externally imposed interventions. Third, innovative financial instruments should be explored, particularly mechanisms linking sovereign debt restructuring with green development objectives. Through such practices, China can gradually articulate and institutionalize its own normative approach to debt sustainability within global sovereign lending regimes. Field research on alternative development initiatives in Laos has given rise to the concept of "adaptive development assistance," emphasizing the importance of aligning aid interventions with local social dynamics, respecting recipient countries' development trajectories, and pursuing shared growth through risk-sharing and cooperative partnership. This approach reflects the distinctive characteristics of China as an emerging development partner, underscoring a model grounded not in prescriptive conditionality but in negotiated developmental alignment [10].

The foremost agenda in institutional reconstruction is the promotion of rule-of-law-based transformation. To date, China lacks a comprehensive foundational law governing foreign aid; the current legal basis is scattered across the principles of the Budget Law and various departmental regulations, which constitutes a deep-seated source of the existing governance challenges. Scholars have noted that the foreign aid provisions within the Foreign Relations Law of the People's Republic of China serve declaratory, gap-filling, guiding, and coordinating functions. However, due to their policy-law nature, they exhibit limitations in terms of operability, institutional alignment, and overall coordination. It has been suggested that a dedicated Foreign Aid Law should be developed to shift from "declaratory functions" to "implementation effectiveness" [11]. Other researchers propose a dual analytical approach: vertically, to systematically trace the historical evolution of China's foreign aid policies, norms, and practices; horizontally, to critically examine the foreign aid systems and practices of other countries and regions, thereby providing a systematic foundation for constructing a comprehensive Foreign Aid Law [12]. Such a law should be swiftly legislated to codify aid's strategic objectives, define the responsibilities and authority of managing institutions, regulate project cycles, and stipulate transparency and accountability mechanisms. On this basis, three supporting systems should be cultivated: first, the establishment of an independent aid project evaluation body, drawing on the experiences of the UK Independent Commission for Aid Impact and the Millennium Challenge Corporation to progressively embed "results-oriented" principles into the institutional framework; second, the transformation of CIDCA from a "planning and coordination agency" into a "strategic leadership agency," with moderate enhancement of its country-specific planning and policy research capacities; third, the institutionalization of

multilateral cooperation channels, establishing regular collaboration frameworks with international organizations, emerging donor countries, and civil society in recipient countries, leveraging multilateral mechanisms to provide professional endorsement and compliance buffers for bilateral aid. Studies indicate that although trilateral cooperation entails high transaction costs, it can produce more significant development outcomes. China should seize the opportunity presented by the growing prevalence of trilateral initiatives to expand avenues for sharing development experience and to enhance mutual understanding and trust with international organizations and traditional donors [10].

Narrative reconstruction should shift from "defensive expressions" toward "alternative norms." The core dilemma in China's aid discourse is fundamentally "doing much, saying too little"—not a matter of insufficient volume, but of lacking a conceptual and discursive system capable of effectively competing with Western aid paradigms. Expressions such as "no conditionality" and "mutual benefit" are negative or self-limiting; while they successfully delineate the boundaries of China's aid, they fail to clearly articulate its core. This insight suggests that narrative reconstruction must extract generalizable normative propositions from rich practical experience.

This study proposes three conceptual anchors for further development. First, "Development Effectiveness 2.0." Traditional aid effectiveness emphasizes input-output ratios at the project level, whereas Chinese practice reveals a chain-activation perspective—"infrastructure → industrial ecosystem → employment opportunities"—shifting the focus of aid outcomes from "what was delivered" to "what was generated." Recent field research on China's mushroom aid project in Africa illustrates the complexity of technical assistance across implementation, diffusion, commercialization, conflict, and recalibration: local communities progressed from skepticism—"are these white mushrooms safe?"—to active learning motivated by tangible benefits; translators grew and started entrepreneurial ventures through technical training; aid providers navigated a dynamic balance between marketization, social impact, and state capacity, exploring a model of "symbiotic" aid [13]. Second, "embedded cooperation." China's medical teams in remote African villages, as well as agricultural experts working directly alongside local farmers, exemplify a form of collaboration distinct from "airport-based aid," highlighting the value of conceptualizing this embedded approach to counter the stereotype that "China's aid is detached from local realities." Third, "connectivity as a public good." Traditional aid projects such as roads and railways, when situated within a macro-narrative of regional economic integration, demonstrate positive externalities by reducing transaction costs, stimulating trade and investment, and benefiting third-party countries.

## 5. Conclusion

The challenges facing China's foreign aid are not the result of policy errors or insufficient capacity, but rather the "growing pains and transitional strains" inherent to a super-sized emerging aid actor navigating a period of identity elevation and institutional transformation. From the political mobilization of revolutionary internationalism, through the project management of development mutualism, to the strategic guidance of global developmentalism, each paradigm shift has been accompanied by an overlay of old and new elements. The moral capital embodied by the TAZARA Railway continues to serve as a narrative foundation for South-South solidarity, the four decades of project management experience accumulated by the Ministry of Commerce provide indispensable support for scaling up operations, and the establishment of CIDCA has created an institutional platform for strategic integration. Cognitive-theoretical analyses of China's aid policy reforms suggest that while China established CIDCA by learning from developed donor countries, it simultaneously retained domestic paradigms, such as the "loans-for-oil" model, with recipient feedback

serving as a secondary source of policy adaptation. Path dependence is not an obstacle to progress; rather, it is the starting point. The critical task lies in identifying which institutional legacies require creative transformation and which inertial patterns call for prudent breakthroughs.

Beyond concrete policy recommendations, the distinctiveness of China's aid lies not merely in its scale but in its deep embedding within the civilizational logic of Chinese-style modernization. This civilizational logic encompasses at least three dimensions: a "materialist" orientation that prioritizes infrastructure to activate endogenous development momentum, contrasting with Western "disciplinary" paradigms that foreground institutional transplantation; a relational approach that treats aid as a long-term investment in inter-state relations rather than a tool for crisis response, contrasting with atomized project-cycle–exit frameworks; and a profound respect for recipient-country sovereignty, rooted in China's structural empathy shaped by its semi-colonial historical experience. This civilizational logic operates in the everyday practice of Chinese aid, yet has long remained largely "unsaid." The future research agenda on China's foreign aid should not be limited to aligning with Western evaluation standards or fine-tuning management processes. Instead, it must aim to transform these tacit practices into a knowledge system that is articulable, debatable, and commensurable. Field studies of China-Laos alternative development projects highlight a "go-with-the-flow" aid philosophy, which embodies the co-construction of a shared-risk, equitable, and collaborative framework for a community with a shared future for humanity [10]. This research endeavor represents both an academic mission and a contribution to the global knowledge system on development that China is uniquely positioned to make. While the Global Development Initiative anchors China's aid in a new historical trajectory, institutional evolution is never a linear, unidirectional process; it is inevitably the entanglement of residual path-dependent practices with the painstaking emergence of new logics. It is precisely this entanglement that renders the study of China's foreign aid both challenging and rich with theoretical potential.

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