

Seifudein Adem. 2023. *Africa's Quest for Modernity: Lessons from Japan and China*. Cham: Springer. 269 pp.

This work has many virtues, but first and foremost among them are that it de-centers North America and Europe from the discussion about models for Africa's quest for modernity, and it views the developmental process in Africa from a fresh perspective. Seifudein Adem uses as his basis the work of Ali Mazrui (1933-2014), a Kenyan-born scholar. Mazrui wrote mostly about Africa's experience with Europe and North America, but Adem makes good use of Mazrui's shorter remarks on China and Japan as well.

This is a book with many parts, and some chapters seem to have been written to stand alone. But in a nutshell, Adem's useful discussion concerns the following basic propositions: Can the developmental histories of China and Japan provide models for African states, or African states working on the multilateral level? On the partnership level, can Chinese and Japanese participation in projects in Africa contribute meaningfully now to development? Is one of the two a better partner?

Contrary to what one might expect, Adem finds that in terms of effective state-led development, Japan might provide more portable/usable examples and models than neighboring China. This seems counter-intuitive at first, in a world stunned by China's progress over the past thirty years. Looking at the longer time frame, however, as Adem discusses, Japan had a long tradition of adopting tools and intellectual systems—Chinese characters, Buddhism from India (via China), and Confucianism—from abroad. In the Edo period (1603-1868), Japan had already experienced a “mini-industrialization,” had created public spaces of discourse, and had achieved relatively high literacy. During the Meiji period (1868-1912) that followed, elites speedily (though there were moments of disorientation, false starts, and changes in direction) decided, “There's a real danger of domination from foreign powers; we'd better move the country forward.” Contemporary Japan values “recycling” experienced politicians (i.e., losing an election does not mean the politician is finished) and stresses “win-win” outcomes and the creation of harmony. African states would benefit from all of these desiderata. China, on the other hand, had a two-thousand-year experience of being the regional big power or hegemon in East Asia. It took China longer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to adjust to the idea of importing foreign technologies and to answer in the negative the question, “Must we become Western?”

Regarding the “who is our best partner now” question, to put it very simply, Adem suggests that African states and multilateral organizations should cooperate with everyone, including the former colonial powers. Between China and Japan, he observes that the latter has not been very interested in Africa. When it has been (as in Prime Minister Abe's 2014 visit to Africa), it sometimes appears to have been mostly interested in responding to or equaling Chinese overtures.

For the last thirty years, Chinese projects in Africa have proliferated. China also has what we might call a “heritage advantage” (anti-colonial power, friend of the liberation movements, your all-weather friend). Adem, however, very intelligently asks if, in the long run, the imperative of capital won't encourage the excesses and unequal relationships that African states suffered in the pre-1950 period. For example, as we witness the continuing rise of China, will we

not see continuing trade imbalances and African states again exporting raw materials in return for machinery that they currently cannot make for themselves? Skills and industrial capacity also need to be “imported.” Adem reviews that there are Chinese optimists, Chinese pragmatists, and Chinese pessimists in Africa today. Today, the China optimists predominate. He suggests that China build the people’s assembly building (Sudan), new roads, and lighting in the capital (Sudan)—very visible projects and the people can all see the results—as long as the individual countries also improve agricultural productivity, living standards rise, etc.

Finally, and very helpful, Adem looks at the good progress of (most of) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and wonders how African states, separately or together, can make the same strides forward. In particular is the examination of how they dealt with the regional giant, China, especially after 1990, useful? Adem concludes that, where possible, African states should deal with China multilaterally because, for the most part, ASEAN has been more effective than individual states and getting the most from partnerships with China. In some scenarios, ASEAN was able to “push back” against Chinese-dominating designs.

If there is a shortcoming to this work, it might be that it has no integrated conclusion but rather comes to an end after including a number of Adem’s reviews and op-ed pieces. Some of these merely repeat what Adem said more completely and persuasively in the earlier chapters. These items could be dropped in Adem’s next printing of the tome.

Kenneth Meyer, *Western Washington University*