

Egypt's Interpretation and Localization of Chinese Modernization in the Global South

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Received: July 19, 2026

Accepted: August 20, 2026

Published: September 30, 2026

To cite this article: LIU Wenjia & ZHANG Junyi. (2026). Egypt's Interpretation and Localization of Chinese Modernization in the Global South. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 205–221, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653–0465.2026.0603.022

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653–0465.2026.0603.022>

The research is sponsored by China's Ministry of Education 2024 Research Project on Country and Regional Studies: "Opportunities and Challenges for 'BRICS+' Cooperation After Expansion" (No. 2024–N92).

Abstract: This article examines how Chinese modernization is interpreted and localized in Egypt within the broader context of Global South development debates. Rather than viewing Chinese modernization as a transferable development model, it argues that Egypt's engagement with Chinese experience represents a process of selective adaptation shaped by its own historical trajectory, developmental challenges, and strategic priorities. Through historical and discourse analysis, the study explores three dimensions of Egypt's reception of Chinese modernization: industrial development and state capacity building, infrastructure-led transformation, and the pursuit of development autonomy. The article finds that China's achievements in manufacturing, poverty reduction, and long-term planning have provided Egypt with a valuable reference framework; however, Egyptian actors do not seek institutional imitation but selectively draw lessons from Chinese experience. By proposing the concept of "localized modernization reference," this study highlights that development experiences are not simply transferred across societies but are reinterpreted through local historical and social contexts. The Egyptian case demonstrates how Chinese modernization contributes to the diversification of modernization pathways in the Global South.

Keywords: Chinese modernization; Egypt; Global South; Development Pathway; China-Egypt relations

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1. Introduction

Modernization has remained one of the most influential concepts in the study of social transformation, economic development, and political change. Since the emergence of classical modernization theories in the mid-twentieth century, modernization was often interpreted through a relatively linear framework in which industrialization, market expansion, urbanization, institutional transformation, and cultural change would eventually lead societies toward a Western-style model of modernity. Walt Rostow, for example, conceptualized development as a sequence of stages moving from traditional society toward maturity and high mass consumption (Rostow 4–16).

However, the experiences of postcolonial societies have increasingly challenged the universality of this framework. Many countries outside the Western world have achieved significant economic transformation without fully adopting Western institutional arrangements. The concept of “multiple modernities” proposed by Shmuel Eisenstadt provides an important theoretical perspective for understanding these diverse trajectories. Modernity, in this view, is not a single historical pattern but is reconstructed through distinct historical experiences, cultural traditions, and institutional conditions (Eisenstadt 1–4). This perspective has become increasingly relevant in the Global South, where countries continue to search for development strategies compatible with their own historical and social realities.

Within this broader debate, China’s development experience has attracted considerable international attention. Since the initiation of economic reforms in 1978, China has undergone far-reaching structural transformation through gradual reform, industrial upgrading, integration with global markets, and continuing institutional adaptation (Naughton 95–126, 155–184). This experience has generated debate over whether China represents an alternative pathway of modernization distinct from Western neoliberal development models. Some analyses emphasize experimentation and adaptive institutional change rather than a fixed, exportable blueprint (Ang 23–72), while the “China Model” debate has also focused attention on the distinctive relationship between governance, development, and institutional performance in China (Bell 1–13).

This debate has particular significance for countries of the Global South. Many developing countries have experienced difficulties in implementing externally designed development models, especially those associated with structural adjustment and market-oriented reforms. As a result, alternative development experiences have gained increasing attention. Nevertheless, the international circulation of development experiences should not be understood as a simple process of imitation or policy transfer. Development ideas are always interpreted through local histories, political institutions, and social expectations. Therefore, examining how individual countries understand and adapt foreign development experiences provides a more nuanced approach to studying global modernization processes.

Existing scholarship relevant to this study can be organized into three broad strands. The first concerns Western modernization theory and its subsequent revision. Classical stage-based approaches treated modernization as a comparatively universal process of structural transformation, whereas the multiple-modernities perspective challenged the assumption that modernity must converge on a single institutional and cultural form (Rostow 4–16; Eisenstadt 1–29). These debates provide the theoretical starting point for asking how non-Western societies

construct development pathways under different historical conditions.

The second strand examines the international communication, reception, and reinterpretation of Chinese modernization. Recent Chinese scholarship has emphasized dialogue, civilizational mutual learning, and the differentiated reception of Chinese modernization in Arab societies, while also noting that communication effectiveness depends on local discourse structures and development concerns (Ding and Li 3–31; Han and Ding 3–29; Wu and Wang 93–110; Yin and Che 3–29; Zheng and Guo 115–124). Related work links Chinese modernization to the interaction between opening-up, globalization, and Global South development governance (Han 114–127; Li and Li 4–11).

The third strand focuses on China-Egypt and wider Middle East development cooperation, especially the Belt and Road Initiative, industrial zones, infrastructure, and the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. This literature demonstrates both the developmental potential of Chinese investment and the importance of domestic institutional conditions in determining outcomes (Chaziza 255–283; Li 18–30). It therefore moves beyond a simple narrative of capital inflow and directs attention to the relationship between external cooperation and local productive capacity.

A gap remains at the intersection of these three strands. Existing studies have not sufficiently connected Egypt's two-century history of state-led modernization with the contemporary Egyptian process of selecting, interpreting, and adapting specific elements of Chinese experience. This article addresses that gap by proposing "localized modernization reference" as an analytical concept. Its contribution is to shift the focus from whether Egypt can copy a Chinese model to how foreign development experience is filtered through historical memory, domestic priorities, institutional compatibility, and concrete constraints.

Egypt represents an important case for analyzing this phenomenon. As one of the oldest civilizations in the world and the most populous Arab country, Egypt has occupied a central position in debates over modernization in the Middle East. Since the nineteenth century, Egyptian rulers and intellectuals have continuously attempted to reconcile economic development, technological advancement, national sovereignty, and cultural identity. The modernization reforms initiated by Muhammad Ali Pasha in the early nineteenth century represented one of the earliest state-led modernization experiments outside Europe, involving military reform, industrial development, agricultural transformation, and educational modernization.

Following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser promoted another major modernization project based on industrialization, economic planning, and national sovereignty. The Nasserist developmental state sought to establish domestic industrial capacity and reduce dependence on foreign powers. However, subsequent economic transformations under Anwar Sadat's *Infitah* policy and Mubarak's market-oriented reforms introduced new challenges, including industrial weakness, unemployment, inequality, and concerns regarding economic dependency. Egypt's contemporary development agenda, particularly Egypt Vision 2030, continues this long-standing search for a sustainable modernization pathway.

Against this historical background, Chinese modernization has attracted growing attention among Egyptian policymakers, scholars, and social commentators. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt in 1956, bilateral relations have gradually expanded from political cooperation to economic, technological, and cultural exchanges. The relationship entered a new stage after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with Egypt becoming a significant partner due to its strategic location, particularly the Suez



Canal. Projects such as the China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, infrastructure cooperation, energy projects, and the development of the New Administrative Capital have become important symbols of contemporary China-Egypt cooperation.

However, interpreting Egypt's engagement with China simply as the acceptance of a "China Model" overlooks the complexity of this relationship. Egyptian actors do not seek to reproduce China's institutional system. Instead, they selectively examine specific aspects of Chinese experience that correspond with domestic development priorities, including industrialization, infrastructure construction, technological upgrading, poverty reduction, and state capacity building. At the same time, Egyptian intellectual discussions also reveal concerns regarding differences in economic structures, governance systems, and social conditions. Therefore, Chinese modernization functions less as a complete model for Egypt and more as a reference framework that is selectively interpreted and localized.

Based on this observation, this article proposes the concept of "localized modernization reference" to explain Egypt's engagement with Chinese modernization. This concept suggests that development experiences do not move between societies through direct transplantation. Instead, they undergo processes of interpretation, adaptation, and reconstruction within specific historical contexts. The Egyptian case demonstrates that Chinese modernization acquires new meanings when viewed through Egypt's own modernization trajectory and developmental challenges.

This article addresses three questions. First, how has Chinese modernization been interpreted within Egyptian political and intellectual discourse? Second, why has Chinese development experience become increasingly relevant to Egypt's modernization debates? Third, what are the possibilities and limitations of applying Chinese experiences within the Egyptian context?

Methodologically, this study combines historical analysis and discourse analysis. It examines Egypt's modernization trajectory, China-Egypt cooperation practices, Egyptian policy discussions, and academic interpretations of Chinese modernization. Rather than evaluating whether Egypt can "copy" China's development path, the article focuses on how Chinese experience is understood, negotiated, and localized within Egyptian society.

The article is structured into three sections. The first section examines Egypt's historical search for modernization and development autonomy from the nineteenth century to the present. The second section analyzes Chinese modernization as a reference framework in Egypt, focusing on industrialization, infrastructure development, poverty governance, and strategic autonomy. The third section discusses the reception, localization, and limitations of Chinese modernization in Egypt, arguing that the significance of Chinese experience lies not in replication but in expanding the diversity of possible modernization pathways in the Global South.

2. Egypt's Historical Search for Modernization and Development Autonomy

The Egyptian interpretation of Chinese modernization cannot be fully understood without considering Egypt's own long historical experience of pursuing modernization. Unlike many developing countries whose modernization debates emerged primarily after independence, Egypt's engagement with modernity began in the

nineteenth century under conditions of imperial competition, colonial pressure, and the search for national autonomy. Throughout the past two centuries, Egyptian modernization efforts have repeatedly revolved around several interconnected questions: how to build industrial capacity, how to strengthen state institutions, how to achieve economic independence, and how to reconcile modernization with cultural and national identity. These historical concerns provide an important foundation for understanding why certain aspects of Chinese modernization have attracted attention in contemporary Egypt.

2.1 Muhammad Ali and the origins of state-led modernization

The earliest systematic attempt to construct a modern Egyptian state is generally associated with Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805 – 1848). After consolidating political authority in Egypt, Muhammad Ali launched a comprehensive reform program aimed at transforming Egypt into an autonomous military and economic power. His modernization strategy was characterized by strong state intervention, institutional restructuring, industrial development, and technological acquisition from Europe.

One of the most important features of Muhammad Ali's reforms was the attempt to establish domestic industrial capacity. The Egyptian government directly invested in textile factories, shipbuilding facilities, weapons production, and agricultural modernization projects. Rather than relying primarily on private capital accumulation, the state assumed responsibility for directing economic transformation. In this sense, nineteenth-century Egypt represented an early example of state-led modernization outside the Western industrial core.

As Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot shows, Muhammad Ali's reforms were not merely administrative adjustments but part of an ambitious effort to create productive and commercial capacities capable of sustaining a stronger state. His industrial and commercial policies sought to expand domestic manufacturing and reduce vulnerability to external economic pressures (Marsot 162–195). Educational missions and technical institutions complemented this strategy by supplying scientific and technical knowledge for state-led modernization.

However, Muhammad Ali's modernization project faced significant structural constraints. The heavy financial burden of military expansion, limited domestic industrial foundations, and increasing European intervention weakened Egypt's developmental ambitions. The Treaty of London in 1840 restricted Muhammad Ali's military expansion and forced Egypt to reduce parts of its industrial protection policies. Subsequently, British occupation in 1882 fundamentally altered Egypt's development trajectory by integrating its economy into a colonial structure centered on agricultural exports, especially cotton production.

The colonial experience left a lasting influence on Egyptian modernization thinking. Modernization became closely connected with the question of sovereignty: economic development was not viewed merely as economic growth but also as a means of maintaining political independence. This historical relationship between development and autonomy remains an important factor shaping contemporary Egyptian perceptions of alternative modernization pathways, including Chinese experience.

2.2 Nasserism and the developmental state experience

Following the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, Gamal Abdel Nasser initiated another major modernization project based on industrialization, economic planning, and national sovereignty. The Nasser period represented one of the most significant examples of developmental state practices in the Arab world.



The Egyptian government during this period adopted extensive state intervention in economic activities. Major industries were nationalized, public-sector enterprises were expanded, and industrial development became a central component of national strategy. The government sought to transform Egypt from an agricultural economy into a modern industrial society capable of achieving economic independence.

The Aswan High Dam became the symbolic representation of Nasser's modernization vision. Beyond its economic functions of electricity generation and agricultural regulation, the project represented technological sovereignty and national development. It demonstrated the belief that large-scale state planning could overcome historical underdevelopment and accelerate modernization.

In many respects, Nasser's developmental strategy shared similarities with later developmental states in East Asia, particularly the emphasis on industrialization, strategic planning, and state coordination. However, the outcomes differed significantly. While countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, and later China successfully developed internationally competitive manufacturing sectors, Egypt's industrial system remained heavily dependent on state enterprises and struggled with productivity, technological innovation, and international competitiveness.

The limitations of Egypt's state-led industrialization were not simply a matter of insufficient state intervention. Waterbury's analysis of the Egyptian public sector shows persistent difficulties in management efficiency, production incentives, and institutional reform, even after the public sector had become central to the development strategy (Waterbury 83–122). These problems created a recurring gap between extensive state authority and the capacity to generate sustained productivity and internationally competitive industry.

These historical experiences are important for understanding Egypt's contemporary interest in Chinese modernization. Egyptian observers are not unfamiliar with state-led development. In fact, Egypt itself experimented with a developmental model decades earlier. The attraction of Chinese experience lies not in the idea of state intervention itself, but in China's apparent ability to combine state coordination with industrial competitiveness, technological upgrading, and integration into global markets.

2.3 From *infatih* to market reform: the search for a balanced development path

The death of Nasser in 1970 marked a major transformation in Egypt's development strategy. Under President Anwar Sadat, Egypt gradually moved away from centralized economic planning toward economic liberalization through the *Infatih* (Open Door Policy). The objective was to attract foreign investment, expand private-sector participation, and reconnect Egypt with the global economy.

Infatih represented a significant ideological shift. Whereas Nasser's modernization emphasized economic sovereignty through state ownership, Sadat sought modernization through integration into international markets. This transformation reflected broader global changes during the 1970s, when many developing countries began adopting market-oriented reforms.

However, liberalization produced mixed results. Although it contributed to economic openness and increased foreign investment, it did not fundamentally resolve Egypt's structural development challenges. Industrial competitiveness remained limited, unemployment continued to be a major concern, and economic growth did not always translate into broad-based social improvement.

During the Mubarak era, Egypt further expanded economic reforms, particularly after adopting structural

adjustment programs supported by international financial institutions. Privatization, fiscal reform, and market liberalization became central policy directions. While these reforms improved certain macroeconomic indicators, scholars noted persistent problems related to inequality, unemployment, and dependence on external economic conditions.

Timothy Mitchell argues that development and economic reform in Egypt were often framed through externally produced forms of expertise and policy knowledge that could obscure the specific structures of domestic production and political economy (Mitchell 209 – 243). This experience contributed to continuing debates regarding the relationship between economic openness, productive capacity, and development autonomy.

The historical trajectory from Nasserism to neoliberal reform created an important background for Egypt's contemporary interest in China. Chinese modernization appears attractive because it represents an alternative combination of market participation and strategic state coordination. Unlike traditional neoliberal approaches that emphasize reducing state involvement, China's experience demonstrates how governments can maintain an active role in industrial policy, infrastructure development, and technological transformation while participating in global economic networks.

2.4 Egypt vision 2030 and contemporary development challenges

Following the political changes after 2011, Egypt entered a new phase of modernization efforts. The government's Egypt Vision 2030 strategy emphasizes sustainable development, industrial upgrading, infrastructure improvement, energy transformation, and social development.

Large-scale infrastructure projects have become central to this strategy. These include the expansion of the Suez Canal, the establishment of the Suez Canal Economic Zone, the construction of the New Administrative Capital, and major investments in transportation and electricity networks. These initiatives reflect a development philosophy that emphasizes state capacity and physical transformation as foundations for economic modernization.

This approach has created important points of connection with Chinese development experience. China's own modernization process has relied heavily on infrastructure construction, industrial zones, and strategic planning. Consequently, Chinese projects in Egypt are often interpreted not merely as foreign investment but as examples of development cooperation associated with broader modernization ideas.

The China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone represents one of the most significant examples. Unlike traditional investment projects focused only on capital inflows, the zone seeks to establish industrial clusters, manufacturing networks, and technological cooperation. Such projects contribute to Egyptian perceptions that Chinese experience may offer lessons in industrialization and economic transformation. (Li 18–30).

Nevertheless, Egypt's engagement with Chinese modernization remains selective. The Egyptian case differs from China in terms of population structure, industrial foundations, institutional arrangements, and historical conditions. Therefore, Chinese modernization is not treated as a ready-made formula but as a source of developmental experience that requires adaptation.

2.5 Historical continuity and the appeal of Chinese modernization

The historical evolution of Egyptian modernization reveals a continuous search for a development path that



combines economic transformation with national autonomy. From Muhammad Ali's early industrialization efforts, through Nasser's developmental state, to contemporary Vision 2030, Egypt has repeatedly attempted to overcome the dilemma between modernization and dependence.

This historical background explains why Chinese modernization resonates within Egyptian discourse. China represents a non-Western society that has achieved industrial transformation, technological advancement, and global economic integration while maintaining its own institutional and cultural identity. (Han and Ding 3–29).

However, Egypt's engagement with China should not be interpreted as an attempt to replace one model with another. Instead, Chinese modernization functions as a reference framework through which Egyptian policymakers and intellectuals reconsider their own development challenges. The significance of Chinese experience lies precisely in its ability to expand the range of possible modernization pathways available to countries of the Global South.

3. Chinese Modernization as a Reference Framework in Egypt

The significance of Chinese modernization for Egypt does not primarily lie in the possibility of institutional replication, but rather in the ways through which Chinese development experience provides alternative ideas for addressing Egypt's own modernization challenges. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Chinese development achievements have attracted increasing attention among Egyptian policymakers, scholars, and economic actors. Particularly after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the establishment of the China-Egypt comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014, China has become one of Egypt's most important development partners.

However, the Egyptian interpretation of Chinese modernization is selective rather than comprehensive. Egyptian actors generally focus on specific aspects of Chinese experience that correspond with domestic development priorities: industrialization, infrastructure construction, technological upgrading, poverty reduction, and state capacity building. Meanwhile, China's political institutions and governance mechanisms are rarely considered directly transferable. Therefore, Chinese modernization functions in Egypt primarily as a developmental reference framework rather than a complete model.

3.1 Industrialization and state capacity: the appeal of China's development experience

Among all aspects of Chinese modernization, industrialization is perhaps the most significant element attracting Egyptian attention. Historically, Egypt has repeatedly attempted to establish an industrial base, from Muhammad Ali's nineteenth-century factories to Nasser's state-led industrialization program. However, these efforts failed to produce a globally competitive manufacturing sector comparable to East Asian economies. Consequently, China's transformation from an agricultural economy into the world's largest manufacturing center provides an important reference point for Egyptian development discussions.

The Chinese experience differs from traditional neoliberal development approaches because it combines market allocation with an active state role in structural transformation. Industrial upgrading, diversification, and infrastructure involve coordination problems and externalities that can justify facilitating public policy when policy follows an economy's evolving comparative advantages (Lin 193 – 221). China's reform experience also

proceeded incrementally, with market transition, industrial change, technology policy, and global integration developing through successive institutional adjustments rather than a single institutional break (Naughton 95–126, 333–394).

This aspect of Chinese modernization is particularly relevant to Egypt because industrial development has remained one of its central economic challenges. Despite possessing a large population, strategic geographical location, and significant natural resources, Egypt has struggled to develop a manufacturing sector capable of generating sufficient employment and technological advancement. Egyptian policymakers have therefore paid close attention to China's ability to combine industrial policy with global economic integration.

The China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone represents one of the most important examples of this interaction. Established in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, the project reflects a development approach that extends beyond traditional foreign investment. Rather than simply introducing Chinese capital, the zone seeks to create an industrial ecosystem involving manufacturing enterprises, logistics networks, infrastructure facilities, and technology cooperation. (Li 18–30).

From the Egyptian perspective, the significance of TEDA lies not only in investment volume but also in its symbolic meaning. It represents the possibility of transforming geographical advantages into industrial development. The Suez Canal has historically been Egypt's most important strategic asset; however, transforming this advantage into sustainable economic growth has remained a long-standing challenge. Chinese cooperation provides an example of how logistics infrastructure can be connected with industrial production.

Mordechai Chaziza situates China's engagement in Egypt within the Maritime Silk Road framework, where infrastructure, connectivity, industrial investment, and the strategic position of the Suez Canal are closely intertwined. At the same time, he stresses that project outcomes depend on Egypt's economic resources, governance capacity, and ability to integrate cooperation into domestic development objectives (Chaziza 255–283).

Therefore, the Egyptian understanding of Chinese industrialization is not based simply on admiration for China's economic success. Rather, China provides a practical reference for addressing a historical Egyptian dilemma: how to transform state capacity and geographical advantages into productive economic structures.

3.2 Infrastructure-led development and the construction of state capacity

Infrastructure development represents another major dimension through which Chinese modernization is interpreted in Egypt. In contemporary development debates, infrastructure is no longer viewed merely as physical construction; it is increasingly understood as a foundation for economic organization, state capacity, and social transformation.

China's modernization experience demonstrates the strategic role of infrastructure in development. High-speed rail networks, ports, industrial parks, energy systems, and urban development projects have played a central role in China's economic transformation. Infrastructure has functioned not only as a response to existing economic demand but also as a tool for creating new economic opportunities. (Naughton 333–394).

This perspective has influenced Egyptian development strategies in recent years. Large-scale infrastructure projects have become central components of Egypt Vision 2030, including: the expansion of the Suez Canal; the New Administrative Capital project; national electricity development programs; transportation and logistics



networks.

The New Administrative Capital, in particular, reflects the Egyptian state's attempt to create a new administrative and economic center capable of reducing pressure on Cairo and promoting urban modernization. Although the project has generated debates regarding cost, financing, and social priorities, it illustrates the importance placed by Egyptian policymakers on infrastructure as a symbol of national modernization.

Chinese participation in Egyptian infrastructure development has further strengthened perceptions of China as a development partner. Chinese companies have participated in projects involving energy, transportation, construction, and urban development. These projects contribute to the image of Chinese modernization as associated with visible material transformation. (Chaziza 255–283).

However, infrastructure cooperation also reveals important differences between China and Egypt. China's infrastructure expansion occurred within a broader industrial ecosystem supported by manufacturing capacity, technological capabilities, and strong domestic financial institutions. Egypt, by contrast, faces constraints including fiscal pressure, foreign exchange shortages, and employment challenges. Therefore, infrastructure alone cannot reproduce China's development outcomes.

This distinction highlights the importance of understanding Chinese modernization through the concept of selective learning. Egyptian actors are interested not simply in constructing physical infrastructure but in understanding the institutional mechanisms that allow infrastructure to contribute to broader economic transformation.

3.3 Poverty reduction and social governance: learning from China's development experience

China's poverty reduction achievements have also attracted considerable attention in Egypt and the wider Arab world. China's success in reducing extreme poverty has been widely discussed by international organizations and development scholars. According to Chinese official data, hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty over several decades, making poverty reduction one of the most significant aspects of China's development experience. (Naughton 237–256).

For developing countries, poverty reduction is closely connected with broader questions of economic transformation, employment creation, and social stability. Egyptian interest in Chinese poverty governance reflects domestic concerns regarding inequality, population growth, and social welfare.

Chinese poverty reduction policies have emphasized several elements: targeted poverty alleviation; infrastructure improvement in rural areas; industrial development; employment generation; coordination between central and local governments. (Naughton 237–256).

These approaches differ from purely welfare-based poverty reduction models because they emphasize productive transformation and integration into economic development.

Egyptian scholars and policymakers have shown interest in these experiences because Egypt faces similar challenges regarding regional inequality and employment pressure. Rural development, youth employment, and social inclusion remain major components of Egypt's development agenda.

Nevertheless, Chinese poverty reduction experience also demonstrates the limits of direct transplantation. China's achievements were supported by unique conditions, including decades of rapid industrialization, large-scale manufacturing employment, and extensive administrative mobilization capacity. Egypt's demographic

structure, economic institutions, and fiscal conditions differ significantly.

Therefore, Chinese poverty governance is interpreted in Egypt mainly as a source of policy inspiration rather than a replicable formula. The Egyptian case again demonstrates that modernization experiences are transformed through local adaptation.

3.4 Strategic autonomy and the search for non-western modernity

Beyond economic factors, one of the deepest reasons for Egyptian interest in Chinese modernization lies in the question of development autonomy. For many countries in the Global South, modernization has historically been associated with Westernization, creating tensions between economic development and cultural or political independence.

Egypt's modern history reflects this dilemma. From colonial experience to postcolonial development efforts, Egyptian elites have repeatedly sought ways to modernize while maintaining national sovereignty. Chinese modernization attracts attention because it represents a case in which a non-Western civilization achieved industrial transformation and technological advancement without abandoning its own historical identity.

This does not mean that Egypt seeks to adopt China's political system. Instead, Chinese experience challenges the assumption that modernization must follow a single Western pathway. The concept of multiple modernities provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon: societies may pursue modernization according to different institutional and cultural arrangements. (Eisenstadt 1–29).

In this sense, Chinese modernization provides Egypt with a broader intellectual resource. It expands the range of possible development narratives available to Egyptian policymakers and scholars. The significance of China lies not only in specific economic achievements but also in demonstrating that modernization can take diverse forms.

The Egyptian reception of Chinese modernization therefore combines practical and symbolic dimensions. Practically, China offers lessons regarding industrialization, infrastructure, and development planning. Symbolically, China represents the possibility of achieving modernity while maintaining civilizational identity and strategic autonomy.

4. Reception, Localization and Limits of Chinese Modernization in Egypt

The international influence of Chinese modernization does not depend only on China's domestic achievements but also on how other societies interpret and reconstruct its meaning. Development experiences are never transferred in a purely objective manner; rather, they are mediated through political discourse, academic interpretation, media narratives, and local development needs. The Egyptian reception of Chinese modernization demonstrates this process clearly. While Chinese experience has gained increasing attention among Egyptian policymakers and intellectual communities, its acceptance has remained selective and pragmatic. Egypt does not regard Chinese modernization as a complete development blueprint but as a source of ideas, experiences, and policy references that can be adapted according to domestic conditions.

4.1 Political and intellectual reception of Chinese modernization in Egypt

Since the establishment of the China-Egypt comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014, political exchanges



between the two countries have increasingly emphasized development cooperation, mutual learning, and shared interests. Egyptian political discourse frequently highlights China's achievements in economic development, technological advancement, and poverty reduction, particularly within the broader framework of South-South cooperation.

At the governmental level, Chinese modernization is often associated with several concepts that correspond with Egypt's own development priorities: economic transformation; infrastructure modernization; technological innovation; social development; strategic independence.

The Egyptian government's interest in China is closely connected with its search for development partners beyond traditional Western economic relationships. China's cooperation model is perceived as emphasizing mutual benefit, infrastructure investment, and long-term economic cooperation rather than political conditionality. This perception has contributed to China's increasing importance within Egyptian foreign economic policy.

However, Egyptian intellectual discussions present a more complex picture. Egyptian scholars and think tanks generally recognize China's developmental achievements but also examine the applicability and limitations of Chinese experience. Rather than accepting the idea of a universal "China Model," many Egyptian researchers emphasize the need to consider differences between Chinese and Egyptian historical conditions.

Studies on Arab perceptions of Chinese modernization indicate that Arab scholarship often focuses on economic development, technological progress, strategic autonomy, and the possibility of civilizational distinct modernization. At the same time, these studies repeatedly stress that Chinese experience emerged from specific historical conditions and must be interpreted in relation to local Arab priorities rather than treated as a universally replicable formula (Wu and Wang 93–110; Yin and Che 3–29; Zheng and Guo 115–124).

This perspective is particularly evident in Egypt because the country itself has a long history of state-led modernization experiments. Egyptian intellectuals are therefore not encountering modernization debates for the first time. Instead, they evaluate Chinese experience through their own historical memory, including Muhammad Ali's reforms, Nasser's developmental state, and later market-oriented reforms.

In this sense, Egyptian reception of Chinese modernization represents a dialogue between two developmental experiences rather than a one-way process of influence.

4.2 Think tanks, academic exchanges, and the production of development knowledge

The role of think tanks and academic institutions is particularly important in shaping Egyptian interpretations of Chinese modernization. Unlike popular media narratives, think tank discussions often present a more balanced evaluation that includes both opportunities and challenges.

Institutions such as the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies have increasingly examined China's economic rise, Belt and Road Initiative, and implications for Arab development. These discussions frequently acknowledge China's contribution to infrastructure development and economic cooperation while also analyzing issues such as trade imbalance, investment risks, and debt sustainability.

This reflects an important characteristic of Egyptian reception: Chinese modernization is evaluated through practical development concerns rather than ideological identification.

For example, discussions surrounding Chinese investment in Egypt often focus on several questions: Can

Chinese investment contribute to industrial upgrading? Can cooperation create local employment opportunities? Can technology transfer strengthen domestic capabilities? How can Egypt avoid becoming merely a market for foreign products?

These questions demonstrate that Egyptian actors are concerned not only with attracting investment but also with transforming external cooperation into domestic development capacity.

Academic exchanges between Chinese and Egyptian universities have also contributed to the construction of knowledge networks around Chinese modernization. Research institutions have increasingly studied topics including: China's poverty reduction policies; special economic zones; industrial development strategies; governance capacity; China-Arab cooperation. (Ding and Li 3–31).

Through these academic interactions, Chinese modernization is transformed from a national development experience into a subject of comparative study.

This process is consistent with the broader logic of knowledge circulation in the Global South. Development ideas travel through institutions, experts, educational exchanges, and policy networks. Their influence depends not only on the original experience but also on how receiving societies reinterpret them according to local priorities.

4.3 Media communication and the formation of public perceptions

Beyond government and academic institutions, media communication plays an important role in shaping public understanding of Chinese modernization in Egypt. The expansion of Arabic-language communication platforms, including Chinese media outlets and social media channels, has increased the visibility of China's development narratives within Arab societies.

Chinese Arabic-language media frequently emphasize themes such as: poverty alleviation; technological innovation; infrastructure achievements; cultural exchange; China-Arab cooperation.

These narratives contribute to the construction of a positive image of China as a development partner. Research on the international communication of Chinese modernization in the Arab world suggests that Arabic-language platforms are important channels through which Chinese development concepts enter Arab public discourse, but their reception depends on dialogue, translation, and local interpretive frameworks (Wu and Wang 93–110).

However, visibility does not automatically equal acceptance. Media narratives are always interpreted through existing social and political contexts. Egyptian audiences evaluate Chinese modernization according to domestic concerns, including employment opportunities, economic growth, social welfare, and national interests.

For example, infrastructure projects supported by China may generate positive perceptions because they provide visible economic benefits. Yet public discussions may also raise questions regarding financing, implementation, and long-term economic effects.

Therefore, the communication of Chinese modernization involves not only the transmission of information but also a process of negotiation between external narratives and local interpretations.

4.4 Localization rather than replication: the Egyptian transformation of Chinese experience

The central argument of this article is that Chinese modernization in Egypt should be understood through



localization rather than replication.

Development models are often discussed as if they can be transferred from one country to another. However, historical experience demonstrates that successful development strategies are deeply embedded in specific institutional, economic, and social environments. When they move across borders, they are inevitably modified.

The Egyptian interpretation of Chinese modernization illustrates this process.

First, Chinese industrialization is interpreted through Egypt's concern with employment creation and economic diversification. Egypt does not seek to reproduce China's manufacturing system but hopes to strengthen domestic productive capacity.

Second, Chinese infrastructure experience is understood through Egypt's emphasis on state-building and national development. Infrastructure projects are viewed not only as economic investments but also as symbols of modernization and national transformation.

Third, Chinese development planning is interpreted through Egypt's search for strategic autonomy. The attraction of China lies partly in the possibility of combining global economic integration with greater policy independence.

This process can be summarized as follows:

Chinese Experience	Egyptian Interpretation	Local Development Objective
Industrial policy	Building productive capacity	Economic diversification
Infrastructure development	Strengthening state capacity	National modernization
Poverty reduction	Social stability and inclusion	Development legitimacy
Long-term planning	Strategic coordination	Policy autonomy

**Table 1. Localization of Chinese modernization in Egypt:
selective learning and development objectives**

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis presented in Sections 3 and 4.

Note: The table presents analytical correspondences rather than institutional equivalence. “Localization” means selecting transferable policy functions and adapting their implementation to Egypt's historical, fiscal, demographic, institutional, and geopolitical conditions.

The table reveals a three-stage logic of localization. First, Egyptian actors identify the developmental function of a Chinese practice—such as building productive capacity, strengthening connectivity, improving social inclusion, or coordinating long-term policy. Second, that function is translated into an Egyptian policy objective rather than copied as an institution. Third, implementation is screened against domestic constraints and adjusted accordingly. The internal logic of localization is therefore problem-oriented and selective: what travels across borders is not an institutional package, but a set of functions and experiences whose relevance depends on compatibility with local conditions. This challenges the simple distinction between “Western modernization” and the “China Model” and shows how Global South countries can construct hybrid development pathways through selective incorporation.

4.5 Limits and challenges of Chinese modernization transfer

Although Chinese modernization has become an important reference point in Egypt, the transfer of development experience is constrained by structural differences between the two countries. These constraints are not secondary qualifications; they determine which elements of Chinese experience can be localized, the scale at which they can be implemented, and the time horizon over which results can reasonably be expected.

First, fiscal constraints narrow the space for infrastructure-led and state-coordinated development. Egypt must pursue modernization while managing high financing needs, debt vulnerabilities, and competing demands for social expenditure. This means that large-scale projects cannot be assessed only by their visible construction effects; they must also be evaluated in terms of financing structure, foreign-exchange implications, productive spillovers, and their capacity to generate sustainable domestic returns (International Monetary Fund 1–3, 49–52).

Second, demographic structure creates a different employment and social-policy environment. Egypt's large and still-growing population places continuous pressure on education, housing, public services, and especially job creation. A demographic dividend is possible only when the expanding working-age population is matched by sufficient human-capital investment and productive employment opportunities (Sayed 1–6). Consequently, policies inspired by China must be judged by their employment intensity and capacity to absorb labor, not only by aggregate investment or output.

Third, bureaucratic efficiency and implementation capacity limit the translation of policy intent into economic outcomes. Recent assessments of Egypt's business environment continue to identify overlapping regulations, discretionary licensing, complex administrative procedures, and compliance costs as barriers to private-sector entry and expansion. Reforms that reduce administrative requirements and bureaucracy costs are therefore essential if industrial zones, infrastructure, and investment incentives are to generate broader productive effects rather than isolated projects (International Monetary Fund 59–62).

Fourth, geopolitical and external economic pressures shape Egypt's room for policy autonomy. The country's strategic location creates opportunities through the Suez Canal and regional connectivity, but it also exposes the economy to shocks in surrounding trade and security environments. Recent Red Sea disruptions have produced persistent shortfalls in Suez Canal revenues, illustrating how external shocks can directly affect foreign-exchange earnings and fiscal conditions (International Monetary Fund 7–8). This vulnerability makes diversification of production, export capacity, and external partnerships especially important.

Taken together, the four constraints—fiscal space, demographic pressure, bureaucratic efficiency, and geopolitical exposure—explain why localization must precede replication. Chinese experience can be most useful to Egypt when it is disaggregated into policy functions and then tested against domestic institutional and economic conditions. The value of Chinese modernization therefore lies not in providing ready-made solutions, but in expanding the repertoire of development possibilities available to Egypt while clarifying the conditions under which particular lessons may or may not work.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined how Chinese modernization is interpreted and localized in Egypt within the broader



debate on development pathways in the Global South. The Egyptian case shows that the international significance of Chinese modernization does not rest on the export of a complete institutional model. Its influence operates through selective reference: particular experiences are identified, reinterpreted, and connected to locally defined development problems.

The historical analysis demonstrates that Egypt's interest in Chinese experience is rooted in its own long search for modernization and development autonomy. From Muhammad Ali's state-led reforms to Nasserist industrialization, market-oriented reform, and Egypt Vision 2030, Egyptian development debates have repeatedly returned to the same core questions of productive capacity, state effectiveness, external dependence, and national sovereignty. Chinese modernization resonates because it enters an already established Egyptian conversation rather than creating an entirely new one.

The analysis of contemporary reception further shows that industrial policy, infrastructure development, poverty governance, and long-term coordination are interpreted in Egypt primarily according to their functions. The localization process follows a sequence of functional identification, institutional translation, and constraint adjustment. This explains why the Egyptian reception of China is neither simple emulation nor rejection: lessons are filtered according to employment needs, productive upgrading, state capacity, and strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the scope for adaptation is bounded by material and institutional realities. Fiscal constraints limit the scale and sequencing of state-led investment; demographic pressures increase the urgency of employment creation; bureaucratic inefficiencies can weaken policy implementation; and geopolitical shocks can reduce external revenues and policy space. These factors demonstrate that the success of any borrowed development experience depends less on formal similarity to the original model than on its compatibility with domestic conditions.

The concept of “localized modernization reference” therefore provides the article's main theoretical contribution. It offers a way to understand development learning in the Global South as an active process of selection and reconstruction rather than one-way policy transfer. The Egyptian case suggests that the growing relevance of Chinese modernization lies in widening the range of imaginable development pathways while leaving the receiving society responsible for institutional choice and adaptation. Future research can test this framework through comparative studies of other Arab and Global South countries and through more systematic analysis of Egyptian policy documents, elite discourse, and project-level outcomes.

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(Editors: LIU Rong & LI Ruobing)