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ARTICLE

Postcolonial experiences of Chinese aid: Encountering and welcoming South–South aid from the middle

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Abstract

This paper explores how public servants in aid-recipient countries perceive and encounter the development structures and normative discourses of South–South partnerships. The paper draws on interviews with senior public servants in the Antigua and Barbuda government who interface directly with Chinese aid delivery. The public servants perceive that 'Northern' development models have largely failed and that 'Southern' donors can facilitate alternative development pathways. They understand that South–South partnerships give aid-recipient countries greater control over their development futures, invoking some of the original radicalism of South–South partnerships. The public servants also perceive that Western critiques of Chinese aid are underpinned by orientalism, and they reject notions that they are being passively integrated into the Chinese government's global vision. Yet, they do not passively internalise the normative discourses on South–South partnerships. This paper advances a multi-scalar postcolonial geographical analysis of South–South partnerships and will be of interest to those exploring how aid-recipient countries navigate the politics and power relations of the contemporary global aid landscape. The paper also advances debates on how subaltern geopolitics play out in the context of increasing South–South partnerships. Finally, with its focus on South–South partnerships, the paper contributes to the aid ethnographies literature.

KEYWORDS

Caribbean, China, Chinese aid, Postcolonial geography, Southern donors, South–South partnerships

1 | INTRODUCTION

Essentialised dichotomies of North–South, developed–underdeveloped, First World–Third World have framed global 'North' countries as the natural authors and architects of development and justified their intervention in 'Southern' states (Kapoor, 2008; Kothari, 2005). However, these hegemonic binary geo-imaginaries are being challenged by growing 'Southern'[1] economies – particularly China – that are taking lead roles in the distribution of aid, growing the influence of South–South partnerships (Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Gu et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2019; Raghuram et al., 2014).

'Southern' donors frame themselves as distinct from 'Northern' donors by discursively emphasising normative ideas such as shared 'developing' country identity, expertise in appropriate development across similar contexts, rejection of hierarchies, and mutual opportunity (Mawdsley, 2012, 2019), and by de-emphasising accountability and reporting requirements common with 'Northern' donors (Day, 2021). The 'reality' of these discourses is widely questioned (e.g., Bry, 2017; Gray & Gills, 2016; Lee & Gray, 2016; Ray et al., 2017). Nevertheless, South–South partnerships are transforming development structures and discourses, revealing the legitimacy and authority of 'Southern' donors as sites of knowledge and resources that can contribute alternative development models and pathways (Abdenur & Da Fonseca, 2013; Constantine et al., 2016; Sidaway, 2012).

Much of the literature on South–South partnerships focuses on broad-scale geopolitics and geoeconomics, and an emergent literature on the geoculture of South–South partnerships (e.g., Cheng & Liu, 2022; Lin et al., 2019, 2021; Narins & Agnew, 2020; Sidaway & Woon, 2017; Sum, 2019; Winter, 2021; Zhang & Wen, 2022), linked to wider discussions about the rise of 'Southern' economies and interstate relations (Schindler et al., 2022; Woon, 2018). Within this scholarship there is also a tendency to centre on China's 'Belt and Road Initiative'. However, research on how 'Southern' aid reconfigures and operates through localities has scarcely begun (Sidaway et al., 2020). Indeed, we still know very little about the complex ways the development structures and normative discourses of 'Southern' aid are perceived and encountered by public servants in aid-recipient countries who interface directly with the financial and political apparatus of 'Southern' aid. Public servants provide an interesting perspective because they are tasked with the implementation of aid projects without direct influence on the geopolitical relations between countries. Indeed, the aid ethnography literature shows us that focus on public servants can advance our understanding about how aid partnerships are given meaning, and how aid delivery is negotiated, debated, and compromised (e.g., Aagaard & Trykker, 2019; Kumi & Kamruzzaman, 2021; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Mosse, 2013; Sou, 2022a). Yet, so far, aid ethnography scholarship has tended to centre on North–South partnerships and the experiences of 'Northern' development professionals (e.g., Fechter, 2014; Kothari, 2006; Müller, 2013; Pailey, 2020; Watts, 2001).

Against this background, our paper asks: how do senior public servants in aid-recipient countries encounter and enframe the development structures and normative discourses of South–South partnerships? We focus on how the structures and normative ideational and operational claims of Chinese aid (e.g., mutual opportunity; expertise in development across similar contexts; less oversight) are experienced, internalised, challenged, or transformed by public servants who are heavily involved in negotiating, debating, and compromising on the delivery of Chinese aid. In so doing, we reveal to what extent senior public servants understand and experience that the world's 'alternative' donor is challenging the colonial grammars that have underpinned development for decades.

Methodologically, we draw on interviews with senior public servants in the government of Antigua and Barbuda – a twin-island country in the Caribbean region that has increasingly partnered with China. We reveal three key findings. First, Antiguan public servants perceive discourses about the alleged proximities in the spatio-temporal development of China and Antigua as tropes that reify and (re)produce colonial narratives of 'Southern' homogeneity. Second, Antiguan public servants frame South–South partnerships as mechanisms to give aid-recipient countries greater control over their development futures, invoking some of the original radicalism of South–South partnerships. Third, they reject colonial binaries that 'Northern' donors are the natural architects of development and they understand that Western-based discourses seek to orientalise China and delegitimise its aid because of Western anxieties over China's geopolitical dominance.

We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our research for postcolonial geographical analyses on the politics and power relations of Chinese aid and contemporary global development more broadly. And also on the significance of being attentive to how the discursive, social, and material practices of Chinese aid (and South–South partnerships more broadly) are encountered by public servants in aid-recipient countries. By shifting analysis to 'the middle' to focus on public servants, our paper advances a multi-scalar postcolonial geographical analysis of Chinese aid, responding to Sidaway et al.'s (2020) call for insights on how Chinese aid reconfigures and operates in localities – in our case, in the minds and experiences of public servants working in the government of Antigua and Barbuda. This paper also adds to the aid ethnography literature, which has been dominated by research on North–South partnerships and 'Northern' development professionals.

The work reported here also adds to the postcolonial tradition and literature of understanding power struggles and the political agency of the 'subaltern' (Spivak, 2003). We understand Antiguan public servants as 'subaltern' in the sense of 'subaltern geopolitics' – a body of scholarship focused on the voices, experiences, and agency of post-colonial elites – including public servants – active in the realm of formal international relations, though marginally positioned within the global political system (Sharp, 2013). Part of our concern in this paper is also the forms of resistance that subaltern people

use to reshape their relationship with donors. Sparke (2008) warns of the tendency to romanticise resistance to global restructuring and summarises the scholarship that gets more specific in its articulation of struggle – for instance, distinguishing resistance from reworking, resilience, and revolution, which suggest different grades of challenge to power dynamics and 'oppositional consciousness' (p. 2). Scholarship that examines how South–South partnerships is transforming development politics and power in the minds of public servants in aid-recipient countries will add dimension to the study of aid and development power.

2 | DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES AND DISCOURSES OF SOUTH–SOUTH PARTNERSHIPS

'Southern' donors have the resources, knowledge, and alternative development practices and approaches that make them legitimate development partners (Lauria & Fumagalli, 2019). Poverty reduction and social welfare are certainly invoked in South–South partnership development models, but the discursive buzz is centred on investment in infrastructure and jobs that will lead to a pragmatic focus on industrial-based economic growth (Cheng & Liu, 2022). Indeed, 'Southern' donors – particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative – condition most of their aid delivery towards infrastructure projects, which has been labelled a 'narrow developmental trajectory' (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020, p. 227).

Scholars have noted a 'Southernisation' of development, whereby Northern partners have adopted the discourse and practices of certain Southern partners (Mawdsley, 2018; Patrick, 2010). Most notably, 'established' Northern donors have (re)focused on development as economic growth through investment in infrastructure.[2] There has been a move away from funding the implementation of development programmes towards aid subsidising private investment, which has been termed a 'post-aid' or 'beyond aid' approach (Janus et al., 2014; Mawdsley et al., 2014). However, 'Southern' donors are also mimicking some 'Northern' donor practices in what has been termed 'two-way socialisation' or the mutual convergence between Northern and Southern development approaches (Fejerskov et al., 2016). For instance, Southern partners are institutionally consolidating their development administrations, further blurring the North–South boundaries in development (see Mawdsley & Taggart, 2022).

The rise of 'Southern' donors questions the longstanding colonial structures and discourses of global development. Since at least 1945, the North–South binary has been a trope that has justified North–South flows of aid and reified colonial development structures and discourses (Esteves & Assunção, 2014). The so-called 'Northern' states discursively constructed themselves as the definers of development and modernity, and the altruistic distributors of material and financial assistance (Ballard, 2013). 'Southern' countries were demarcated by enduring poverty, need, vulnerability, and ultimately dependency on Northern states for aid (Kothari, 2005). When South–South partnerships originally emerged in the 1970s, they were discursively constructed as radical anti-imperialist action to emancipate Southern states from dominance and exploitation by 'Northern' states and to address problems of 'Southern' development (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018). Thus, South–South partnerships were framed as partnerships between oppressed peoples of various nations that were explicitly political and anti-colonial in nature. Contemporary discourses have tempered their original radical rhetoric, but they continue to insist on positionalities, modalities, and ethics that differ from Northern partners (Mawdsley, 2019).

South–South partnerships are narratively imagined as win–win relationships based on mutual opportunity for development rather than notions of dependency that frame North–South partnerships (Alden et al., 2010; Chaturvedi, 2015; Prashad, 2007; Six, 2009). They emphasise discourses about the shared histories and characteristics of Southern countries – such as former colonisation, climates, landscapes, poverty – to justify the transferability of development ideas and practices across 'Southern' contexts (Eyben & Savage, 2013). For example, Chinese scholars and policy experts frame the spatio-temporality of China's development as proximate to the development trajectories of 'global South' countries to legitimise China's modernist and linear developmental logic (Cheng & Liu, 2022). Discourses of similarity are premised on ideas of rejecting knowledge hierarchies and an emphasis on notions such as political equality, sovereignty, and non-interference to allow recipient countries greater ownership over decisions and spending of aid (Bergamaschi et al., 2017). Therefore, the symbolic regime of South–South partnerships is often of empathy and attraction, rather than the sympathy/exasperation of the paternalistic donor, which North–South partnerships have typically invoked (Mawdsley, 2020).

Yet, the normative politics and power relations represented in South–South partnership discourses often do not reflect the 'reality', opening up Southern partners – particularly China – to criticisms more commonly associated with 'Northern' donors (Bry, 2017; Gray & Gills, 2016). For example, Wolford and Nehring (2015) suggest that Southern donors emphasise the similarities between partnering countries at the expense of analysing and historicising the differences and inequalities, which can undermine the transferability of ideas and programmes. Notions of mutually beneficial

development, particularly focused on China, are also thrown into doubt by outcomes such as low wages, substandard labour conditions and safety conditions for construction workers (see Sautman & Hairong, 2016), the displacement of populations, adverse environmental impacts (Ray et al., 2017; Zerba, 2014), and the concessional use of loans that can result in debt traps (Taylor, 2016).

Others argue that South–South partnerships do not deliver on their claims of emancipatory development because 'Southern' donors largely condition aid spending towards infrastructure. Therefore, South–South partnerships continue 'poorer' states' 'epistemic dependence' and interference from external models of development (Girvan, 2009; Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020). Deepening relations and expanding investment also means that larger 'Southern' donors may find it difficult to sustain the claim or reality of non-interference. Indeed, 'Southern' donors have been presented as exploiting poorer states for their oil, minerals, and markets, and being concerned mostly with national interests (Lee & Gray, 2016). The strategies of emerging powers are argued to be less a challenge to OECD-DAC-promoted models of development practice than an expansion and elaboration of those models in a rapidly transforming global economy (De Bonis, 2015). Focus on national virility and the uneven consequences of 'Southern' aid will make it increasingly hard for 'Southern' donors to present themselves as champions contesting injustices within the international hierarchy of states (Gray & Gills, 2016) or sustain a claim to a shared 'developing country' identity (Nel & Taylor, 2013).

In sum, binaries such as North/South and Developed/Developing make less sense in a global landscape where 'Southern' donors are viewed as powerhouses, financing the development of 'poor' countries (Kapoor, 2008; Mawdsley, 2019; Raghuram et al., 2014). Hegemonic geo-imaginaries that the West is the centre of knowledge and modernity are also cast into doubt by South–South partnerships' alternative development practices (Sidaway, 2012). Yet discussions about receding 'Northern' powers (Jacques, 2009) seem premature, and the normative discourses of 'Southern' aid are widely questioned. Nevertheless, with the rise of 'Southern' donors postcolonial thinking on development is being challenged and will need revisiting if it is to accommodate how South–South partnerships are changing the politics and power of global development (Raghuram et al., 2014).

In the following section we outline the appropriateness of Antigua and Barbuda as our case study and the methods we use to explore how senior public servants in aid-recipient countries encounter and enframe the development structures and normative discourses of South–South partnerships with China.

3 | DEVELOPMENT AND CHINESE AID IN THE CARIBBEAN

Scholarship on Caribbean development suggests that decolonisation created space for processes that caused Caribbean 'underdevelopment', including racial capitalism, and the adverse impacts of the International Monetary Fund (Greenidge & Gahman, 2020; Levitt, 2005). Indeed, Caribbean development remains undermined by the Westminster system (Girvan, 2015), plantation logics (Best, 1968), and import dependency and debt (Barry et al., 2020), and scholars suggest that Caribbean development has been in a state of crisis since emancipation (Noxolo, 2018).

Sino-Caribbean aid has increased significantly since the early 2000s and is part of China's fast-growing outreach to the 'global South' more broadly (MacDonald, 2019). These arrangements are characterised by close negotiations between the Chinese and local governments and securing investments and loans from a Chinese policy bank to purchase Chinese state-owned contractors that have focused predominantly on infrastructure projects, such as ports, airports, hotels, hospitals, conventions centres, and roads (Gallagher and Myers, 2014; Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020).

These arrangements created a new 'mechanism of accumulation' in the Caribbean, devoted to the Chinese entrepreneurial state apparatus (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020). Chinese aid reactivated government spending in a region where many countries are undermined by public debt (Rustomjee, 2017). Yet, it has ignited debates about debt sustainability and raised questions about the costs of infrastructures (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2015). Less scholarly attention has been paid to the Caribbean because the region receives less finance from China in comparison with other regions, such as Africa and the Pacific. Also, there is no significant military/strategic component in the Caribbean, thus, no major concerns have emerged from external powers (Zhang et al., 2019).

3.1 | Antigua

Antigua and Barbuda is an independent Commonwealth nation of islands in the Eastern Caribbean. Antigua was colonised by Britain in 1632. Under British rule, Antigua was converted to sugarcane plantations farmed by enslaved African

people (Look et al., 2019). The legacies of this violent colonial period register in current levels of poverty, vulnerability to climate change, and the health of local populations (Gahman et al., 2021). With British decolonisation, on 1 November 1981 the two-island state of Antigua and Barbuda was established by unifying the two islands, which are 47 km apart. During the last census, 85,567 people resided in Antigua and Barbuda, with over 98% in Antigua (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2011). People of Black African descent make up the largest ethnic group (87.3%), followed by those with a mixed ethnic identity (3.8%) and identifying as white/Caucasian (2.7%). The capital port city, St John's, is home to approximately 60% of the population.

Antigua and Barbuda has a small open economy with a GDP of US$1.4 billion (World Bank DataBank, 2021, n.d.). However, the more 'developed' Antigua produces most of the GDP. The main development challenges to Antigua are to bring about greater diversification of its tourism-dependent economy (47% contribution to GDP), a better balance of public finances, regional integration, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development (Mackay & Spencer, 2017; Mohammed & Rei, 2020). The agricultural sector has declined and contributes 3% to GDP, with most foods being imported at high costs to the local population. Poverty rates (18.4%) and unemployment levels (8.7%) have steadily increased. With a Gini coefficient of 0.49, it is one of the most unequal societies in the Caribbean (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2021). Drought and tropical storms adversely impact Antigua, placing it in a 'disaster trap' where each hazard erodes disaster risk reduction capacities, making the island increasingly vulnerable (Lazarus, 2022).

The Government of Antigua and Barbuda has called on the international community to increase aid flows (Government of Antigua and Barbuda, 2021). In pursuit of economic growth, the Government works to attract foreign direct investment and development aid (World Bank DataBank, 2021) – often to improve international tourism (Lightfoot, 2020), but increasingly to address climate change (Vanhala et al., 2021). However, because of its high GNI per capita, Antigua and Barbuda graduated to a high-income country in 2022, making it ineligible for Overseas Development Assistance. Per capita GNI is not an appropriate benchmark for postcolonial countries because poverty persists. It also overlooks how historical contexts, exposure to climate hazards, and the impacts of responding to more frequent climate change hazards create and exacerbate poverty (Robinson & Carlson, 2021).

Over the last 15 years, China has increasingly asserted its role as a provider of development aid (Bernal, 2020). Indeed, Chinese aid made its first significant inroads in the Caribbean region in 2007, when it helped to finance and construct stadiums in Antigua (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020). The renovation and expansion of St John's Harbour and the completion of the container terminal in 2022 were both projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (Global Times, 2022). In the wake of Hurricane Irma's devastation in 2017, the Chinese government also provided Antigua and Barbuda with a US$16 million aid package. The aid package worked towards the economic and technological cooperation between China and Antigua as 'soft loans' for infrastructure projects that are harder to track and typically come with requirements to use Chinese contractors for the work (Escarfullett, 2018). In 2019, the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, Gaston Browne, publicly expressed that 'the People's Republic of China has shown far more interest [in Antigua and Barbuda], even more than other countries in this hemisphere with superior resources. They have shown greater interest in our development. It stands to reason that we must stand with the People's Republic of China' (MacDonald, 2022, p. 132).

3.2 | Interviews with senior public servants

Data were collected in January and February 2020. As our aim was to understand how senior public servants perceive and experience the structures and discourses of South–South partnerships, we were inspired by Pugh (2017) to adopt a qualitative interpretative methodology using semi-structured interviews. This allowed us 'to understand the meaning of behaviour and experiences from the perspective of the individuals involved' (Elliott, 2005, p. 4). Semi-structured interview methods allowed us to contextualise the agency of public servants and to centre their voices in a way that 'gives history back to people in their own words', potentially rescuing it from dominant discourses (Thompson, 1988, p. 265). This allowed our analysis to focus on public servants' subjective perceptions and experiences of South–South partnerships with China, which we analysed against the development structures and discourses about South–South partnerships.

The recruitment of thirteen senior public servants within the Antigua and Barbuda government was initially made through email, then eventually through snowballing with targeted purposive sampling to achieve interviews across five ministerial departments: Department of Environment in the Ministry of Health, Wellness and Environment; Department of Fisheries in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Barbuda Affairs; Department of Tourism in the Ministry of

Tourism, Investment and Economic Development; Department of Infrastructure in the Ministry of Works; and the National Office of Disaster Services.

The public servants interface directly with the political and financial facets of the aid apparatus, as opposed to the 'on the ground' implementation of aid programming. They are tasked with aligning with donor governments, receiving aid, and administering the programmes funded with aid money. All interviewees had experience working with aid from 'Northern' donors and China. All held senior positions within their respective ministerial departments. They had between 5 and 18 years of experience working directly in aid partnerships with China and 'Northern' donors within the Antiguan context. The sample included twelve men and one woman, all self-identifying as Black Caribbean and who lived in St John's. They were aged between 35 and 63 at the time of interviews. Table 1 shows an indicative selection of interview questions about Chinese aid and its role in Antiguan development.

We note that we did not design our questions to interrogate the decision-making processes or discursive strategies that Antiguan bureaucrats use to maintain relationships with Chinese donors; that will be a future study. Rather, our questions were designed to produce self-conscious reflection on differences between donor relations. Our positionality and situated geopolitical circumstances are also important to acknowledge. The idea of Chinese aid moving into geographies previously dominated by the United States and European countries is interwoven through our interview questions, which baseline Chinese practices and expectations against those of 'traditional'/'Northern' donors. Outsiders to both Caribbean and Chinese societies, our study approaches the Chinese aid programme in Antigua through a Euro-Western lens, presuming Euro-Western intellectual colonisation (Jazeel, 2019) as the norm in places like Antigua and positioning Chinese aid as an interloping influence. As with any historical moment, the particularities of the present and the positionality of the researchers influence the questions we think to ask (Scott, 2004, Chapter 1). As Euro-Western scholars, our curiosity about China's rising international influence is interlinked with its less-familiar-to-us political system. We acknowledge that Euro-Western ideas about the upset of the existing international order give rise to our questions about how Chinese approaches will supplant Euro-Western thought-hegemony. Had we been in a different historical moment or positioned differently within it, we may have asked entirely different questions. For instance, Chinese scholars aware of China's efforts since the 1970s to counter a dual-polar world during the Cold War and build South–South cooperation with other emerging economies (Power & Mohan, 2010) may consider China's current-day aid to be a logical continuation of these processes, and design interview questions from this position.

Even scholars self-consciously seeking to avoid relying on expansionist tropes must contend with the idea that China's geographic reach is transforming. Power and Mohan (2010) both point out and themselves use this impulse by scholars of the Euro-Western academy to view Chinese aid as moving into spaces previously occupied by different world powers. They do this in part by drawing an equivalence, or at least a likeness, between China's interests in Africa and the interests of other countries ('we pursue … theory which sees China's interests in Africa as not substantially different from those of other industrialised countries vying for the continent's resources') while pointing out the 'tendency to demonise and over-determine China's role by western critics', which 'perhaps reveals more about their fears and concerns about competition from China than it does about the shape of contemporary China–Africa relations' (p. 3).

Marcus Power has been working at tracing the genealogies of development narratives for decades, such as describing the transformation of 'tropical geography' into 'development geography' by the 1970s (Power & Sidaway, 2004). Interpreting and reinterpreting the world through the lens of the moment will be a persistent project for scholars, and there is a value in this kind of query now. Euro-Western scholarship provides a record of thought from the perspective of social-science practice, which currently dominates research on social processes around the world (Jazeel, 2019), but with any luck it will soon be augmented or supplanted by scholarship from global South scholars. This kind of scholarship

TABLE 1 Selection of indicative questions.

1. How long has your department been receiving Chinese aid?
2. Why is China increasing its aid to Antigua?
3. Why is Antigua choosing to partner with China?
4. Do China and Antigua share any similarities or differences in the challenges they face to achieve development? And how does this impact on the transferability of development ideas and programmes?
5. How do aid partnerships with China differ to partnerships with 'Northern' donors like UNDP and USAID?
6. To what extent does China dictate how aid should be spent? Is this more or less than 'Northern' donors?
7. How does China's form of aid differ from that of 'Northern' donors?
8. To what extent will the Chinese model of development effectively address the development needs of Antigua?

provides a starting point for critical indigenous scholarship to critique and create new forms of scholarship in opposition to established social-science practice, as argued by indigenous scholars such as Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) in the settler-colonial context and Chilisa (2020) in the post-colonial context. While our study is certainly not the most important work on Chinese influence that will come out of this geographic context, its position as an early example will influence the form and content of future studies.

4 | PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH–SOUTH PARTNERSHIPS

4.1 | Rejecting proximities in the spatio-temporality of development

In January 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Antigua and Barbuda issued a statement saying: 'As a developing country, China takes an inclusive approach to cooperation, which is a significant pillar for our friendship and underpins the basis of our relations' (FMPRC, 2021). However, the Antiguan public servants we spoke with question rhetorical claims of shared identities as 'developing' nations and other similarities that facilitate the transferability of development knowledges and programmes (Mawdsley, 2012). They emphasised China's growing economy as a key reason why it cannot be considered a 'developing' country, as two interviewees explained:

> They [China] are growing. I read that it is one of the fastest growing economies in the world ... standards of life have improved a lot, and the number of people who are middle income is huge. How does that compare to countries in Africa or Haiti? (Male, interviewee 9)

> I think that made sense before, but now they [China] are in a totally different position. There is poverty there, yes, but they have been very successful in developing themselves.
>
> (Male, interviewee 2)

The public servants also cited the experiences of climate change as a key distinction between Antigua and China, referring to the devastating impacts of recent hurricanes, as one bureaucrat encapsulated:

> it [hurricanes] is life here. Every year now we are living with hurricanes. Each year they are bigger. You see the damage now, still. We are still dealing with that bit by bit ... Yes, other places in the world are impacted by climate change, including China, but here it happens more. We live with this each year.
>
> (Female, interviewee 3)

The public servants positioned the Caribbean as being more adversely impacted by climate change because of high vulnerability levels[3] and because the frequency and intensity of hurricanes has increased in the region. Likewise, the public servants were sceptical when questioned about the similarities in the development challenges between Antigua and China, and the transferability of knowledge and development programmes:

> We [Antigua and Barbuda] have a strong understanding of our history. OK, the experience between our two islands is not the same and it is not the same across all Caribbean countries, like Jamaica, Montserrat, Barbados, etc., but we share many things in our histories and we know this has shaped who we are as Caribbean people and some of the problems our country faces today. This is not China's history. Yes, they were a poor, but so much is different ... the Caribbean story is not the same.
>
> (Male, interviewee 11)

They rebuffed the essentialist Cartesian logic that countries that fall within the same latitudinal coordinates have similar characteristics (Wolford & Nehring, 2015), using their local knowledge to highlight the place-based histories and experiences in the Caribbean to reject alleged proximities in the spatial and temporal development of China and Antigua (Cheng & Liu, 2022). They understood that any normative claims of shared identities are based on reductive ideas that implicitly homogenise and erase the considerable environmental, economic, and historical differences between Antigua and China. Indeed, the public servants challenged enthusiastic assumptions that translating successful policies and

programmes from one 'Southern' context to another will result in equally good outcomes, based on presumed similarities of economics, geography, or landscape.[4] Their emphasis on differences rather than similarities with China – particularly their emphasis on China's economic growth – suggests that, in the minds of the public servants, the ideational divide between North and South is becoming blurred, and China will find it increasingly difficult to sustain its identity as a 'developing' country with its 'Southern' partners (see Gray & Gills, 2016).

4.2 | Invoking the original radicalism of South–South partnerships and accepting interference

Most of our interlocutors framed Chinese aid as inherently political, implicitly invoking some elements of the original radicalism of South–South partnerships (see Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018). They contextualised partnerships with China within a history of global aid that has fallen unevenly along the North–South axis. In so doing, they stressed the importance of reducing 'Northern' donors' control over the global aid landscape and Antigua's development pathway in particular:

> For a long time, they [Northern donors] gave to us and we implement the plans. This helped us, but the world is different now and other countries want to work with us, with smaller countries. This is good for us because the US and Europe have dominated for so long … Countries like China are growing … We still want to work with them [Northern donors] of course, we need to. But diversity is better.
>
> (Male, interviewee 5)

Or as one interlocutor succinctly summarised: 'We can't keep being ruled by them [global North donors]'. The public servants' framing of South–South partnerships with China was not overtly politicised with explicit anti-colonial sentiments. Nevertheless, they did invoke some of the original radical formulation of South–South partnerships as having the potential to challenge the dominance and control of 'Northern' countries over 'Southern' countries' development futures. The public servants reflect ideas raised in postcolonial geographical scholarship about the historical and contemporary significance of South–South partnerships as spaces that attempt to unsettle essentialising dichotomies and hegemonic imaginaries that 'Northern' countries are the global authors and architects of development (e.g., Abdenur & Da Fonseca, 2013; Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Constantine et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2019; Raghuram et al., 2014; Sidaway, 2012).

With regards to South–South partnership discourses of non-interference and providing space for partners to define their own development futures, the Chinese Embassy in Antigua and Barbuda stated that 'China respects the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Antigua and Barbuda, and supports the development path chosen by its people' (FMPRC, 2021). Two public servants were supportive of this rhetoric, referencing their personal ability to exercise greater authority and knowledge on aid delivery when working with Chinese personnel than with personnel from 'Northern' donors, as one public servant encapsulated:

> Working with the Chinese, they have a discussion with you. Try to understand what you want and then try to meet you … The Chinese come, and they will say, 'we have three million dollars to give for this project'. They would assist us with some manpower and the money, but they are going to build the type of roofs that you want.
>
> (Male, interviewee 7)

These two public servants understood that partnerships with China allowed them to resist colonial grammars that legitimate knowledge and linguistic authority on development is geographically located in certain parts of the world, i.e., 'Western' countries and within the hands of certain people – predominantly white, Western men (Kothari, 2006).[5] Indeed, they viewed partnerships with China as more reciprocal and mutually beneficial than the hegemonic public construction (if not the reality) of global North aid.

In contrast, most of our interlocutors were less certain that Chinese aid provides greater self-determination than that from 'Northern' donors. More specifically, they perceived that China conditions most aid towards infrastructure projects, which they framed as a form of interference. Indeed, in the minds of most public servants, China's infrastructure-based model of development is more about geopolitical and geoeconomic dominance and less about justice for Southern

countries such as Antigua (Armijo & Roberts, 2014). And they perceived China's rhetoric of providing greater sovereignty to Southern partners as more strategic rather than grounded in realpolitik (see Lee & Gray, 2016).

Despite enframing Chinese aid as a form of interference that conditions Antiguan development towards industrial-based growth, the public servants viewed China's development approach as more attractive than 'Northern' donors' approaches that have failed to address the development needs of Antigua. This perspective was well captured by two public servants:

> All aid is interference. I don't care if they [China] say that it is without strings. It always has. We know this working with USAid and others for years. But China works with government, directly, not with NGOs. Everything is close with the government. Yes, there are still conditions that they [China] want us to meet, but they are doing the type of development we want. Not the same old way that the other donors [Northern donors] have done things. (Male, interviewee 5)

> Once a country becomes the richest country in the world you just don't stop there, China is at that stage now that they need to dictate world policy … They gave aid after the hurricane [Irma], but it is infrastructure they want to focus. I invite that because it's bringing money in [to Antigua] … But we both benefit. That's the key. We grow, they grow.
>
> (Male, interviewee 11)

The public servants emphasised China's focus on infrastructure and economic growth as more effective and quicker in addressing Antigua's development needs than 'Northern' aid (Mandon & Woldemichael, 2023). Thus, despite Northern donors increasingly mimicking Southern donors (Janus et al., 2014; Mawdsley et al., 2014), in the minds of the public servants, China's development model is ideationally and operationally distinct. Indeed, the public servants viewed China's approach to development as an attractive alternative to the failings of 'Northern' donor approaches, sympathising with South–South partnerships' 'win–win' discourses (although not wholly – see the following section).

4.3 | Caution on win–win narratives and challenging (re)surfacing orientalism

Our interlocutors expressed caution about the potential adverse outcomes of Chinese aid, particularly on the environment. However, they also perceived (perhaps accurately) that criticisms of Chinese aid are predominantly mobilised in essentialising Western discourses to discourage partnerships with China. The effect among the public servants is a cautious attitude towards donors generally, whether they come from the 'North' or the 'South'.

The public servants were aware of contemporary debates about Chinese aid leading to structural and sustainable transformation or into new forms of dependency (see Taylor, 2016). None of the public servants wholly accepted discourses that South–South partnerships will guarantee mutual benefits without the risks of potential adverse outcomes. Rather, they understood that all donors – 'Northern' and 'Southern' – have their own agendas, which may not always fully align with the development needs of Antigua, as one public servant shared when discussing 'Northern' donors:

> You were taught, whenever you see USAID, DFID, CIDA it means 'we're here to the rescue'. 'We're here to seriously develop you'. You never thought that they set an agenda which does not necessarily mean it is the best for your country.
>
> (Male, interviewee 1)

The public servants brought this cautionary approach to Chinese partnerships. However, at the time of interviews, they did not refer to any specific adverse impacts of Chinese aid that they had observed –further research is required. Rather, and as discussed above, they recognised that Chinese aid continues Antigua's dependence on external states for development, but they welcomed the associated infrastructure-based development as an alternative to the failures of 'Northern' development models. Therefore, their attitudes towards the potential adverse consequences of Chinese aid reflect South–South partnership discourses that recipient countries choose 'to engage and are therefore complicit in any adverse negative outcomes' (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018, p. 870).

Yet, public servants working to maintain and protect 'natural' environments were more likely to express caution about the contested and dislocating impacts of Chinese development on local forests and forest-reliant people and fauna in

particular. For instance, two public servants based in the Department of Environment expressed caution about the effects of Chinese aid on climate change adaptation, animal habits, and environmental degradation:

> it's one of the last places in Antigua where the forests are indigenous, they are the original forest ... But this is one of the last remaining forests ... The problem is that here [in the department of Environment] we understand development different to other ministries. Our priority is the natural environment, the flora, fauna, you see. So here in the department we have been watching to see how it [Chinese aid] will impact our work. There has been nothing to worry so far, but development is changing here so we think about this and protecting areas.
>
> (Female, interviewee 3)

Another of our interlocutors based in the Department of Environment was concerned that Chinese infrastructure projects would exacerbate the impacts of climate change: 'We need to maintain our coral reefs and mangroves because they act as breaks for the waves to not destroy our coastline during storms' (Male, interviewee 13). In this way, they were sympathetic to Mawdsley's (2012) argument that 'win–win' discourses are founded on a simplistic construction of 'national interest' (of both partners) that can obscure the potential uneven social and economic consequences of Chinese development. Their caution is not unfounded because Chinese aid has been associated with environmental degradation (Shapiro, 2019). However, it is important to note that 'Northern' donors have also received similar criticisms (see Cupples, 2022).

Raghuram et al. (2014) suggest that Western emphases and anxieties about the environmental effects of Chinese aid – as well as broader debates about China's pursuit for global dominance – are illustrative of the orientalism (re)surfacing in many of the discussions about 'Rising China'. In the minds of the Antiguan public servants, orientalism certainly (re) appears through essentialising Western discourses about the adverse consequences of Chinese aid, as two public servants encapsulated:

> You have to understand that China is seen as some sort of scary bogeyman. Like China is out to get us. But that's a racism. Big bad China is some idea that serves them [Northern donors], but things have changed, and we can choose who to work with ... I've seen it here, a consultant from CIDA said we shouldn't work with China because it would not be good for us. (Male, interviewee 1)

> I know some say China is bad for us and I imagine you want to know about this, but so far, the relation has been good, it is good.
>
> (Male, interviewee 3)

The public servants perceived that Western discourses have (re)produced orientalist tropes that China will do more harm than good to discourage partnerships. Although we do not have data on the specific Western actors and discourses that the public servants were referring to, the political and economic rise of China has certainly been accompanied by Western apprehension that centre and margin are exchanging places (e.g., Jacques, 2009). The public servants understood that discursive constructs of China as 'other' have origins in Western anxieties about China gaining greater geopolitical dominance and that seek to undermine the partnering potential of China (see Armijo & Roberts, 2014). Moreover, our analysis demonstrates that public servants are frustrated with Western actors and discourses that attempt to speak for and manipulate Antigua's decisions about who to partner with. Rather, we find that the Antiguan public servants drew on their experiences working with 'Southern' and 'Northern' donors to discursively challenge binary geo-imaginaries about China as a 'threat', in comparison to charitable 'Northern' donors (see Ballard, 2013; Kothari, 2005).

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper focused on how senior public servants in aid-recipient countries perceive and experience the development structures and normative framings of South–South partnerships. In so doing, it advances a multi-scalar postcolonial geographical analysis of South–South partnerships and how they are unsettling the geographies of power and politics in development. More specifically, the paper has revealed how public servants in aid-recipient countries largely welcome 'Southern' aid. And they perceive that South–South partnerships challenge essentialising dichotomies and hegemonic

geo-imaginaries that 'Northern' donors are the legitimate architects of development (e.g., Amanor & Chichava, 2016; Abdenur & Da Fonseca, 2013; Constantine et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2016; Mawdsley, 2019; Raghuram et al., 2014; Sidaway, 2012). Yet, the paper also demonstrates how the normative discourses that frame South–South partnerships do not fit neatly with how personnel in aid-recipient governments define and intuitively challenge South–South partnerships (Sou, 2022b). Rather, public servants draw on their experiences working with 'Northern' and 'Southern' donors, their local knowledge, and their historical understandings of global development to unpack and critique the discursive constructs that legitimise South–South partnerships.

In the minds of Antiguan senior public servants, the long-standing colonial grammars of development are being blurred by the rise of Chinese aid. They view China as a site of knowledge and resources that contribute alternative development models and pathways, which challenge long-standing development constructs that 'Northern' donors are the natural architects of development (see Ballard, 2013; Kothari, 2005). However, our interlocutors also recognise that alleged proximities in the spatio-temporal development of China and 'poorer' recipient countries are mobilised to justify 'Southern' aid in the global South (Cheng & Liu, 2022). Indeed, the public servants understand that discourses of 'shared identities' across 'Southern' countries are largely rhetorical claims that imprecisely locate China and its 'Southern' partners in one analytical frame of development. Therefore, the public servants reject normative framings of China as a champion contesting the inequalities and hierarchies of global development (see Bry, 2017; Gray & Gills, 2016). They call for analyses that expose the differences between partnering countries to develop our understanding of policy transferability across 'Southern' contexts (see Wolford & Nehring, 2015).

Our paper also makes visible public servants' appreciation of their increased choice in the contemporary aid landscape. They view Chinese aid as conditional because China emphasises investment in infrastructure projects. However, the public servants do not express entire dissatisfaction with this form of conditionality because they are frustrated with decades of dominance by 'Northern' countries and they perceive that 'Western' development approaches have failed. The public servants are also attracted to China's modernist vision of development, despite being aware that China is pursuing geopolitical dominance and that China is criticised for pursuing a 'narrow development imaginary' (Gonzalez-Vicente & Montoute, 2020, p. 227). Indeed, they view Chinese aid as a form of interference, but one that is better aligned with Antigua's development vision. Therefore, in the minds of the public servants, 'Southern' countries are not being passively integrated into the Chinese government's global vision (Girvan, 2009), and they do not have 'sovereign anxiety' – a generalised unease that the Belt and Road Initiative will undermine the security of one's political community (Mostafanezhad et al., 2023, p. 143). And while the public servants do not fully invoke the radical political intentions of South–South partnerships that emerged during the 1970s (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018), they understand that 'Southern' aid is unsettling the long-standing domination of 'Northern' countries over 'poorer' states. That is, they frame South–South partnerships as mechanisms for aid-recipient countries to take back more control over their development pathways, invoking some of the original radicalism of South–South partnerships.

Mawdsley (2020) highlights how orientalist constructs have been deployed to understand North–South development and yet there is very little by way of understanding South–South partnerships. Our paper responds by highlighting how public servants do not internalise 'new orientalist' ideas that essentialise Chinese exceptionalism and legitimise Sinocentric development (Callahan, 2012). Rather, they perceive that orientalism has (re)surfaced in Western discourses about the adverse effects of Chinese aid, which are underpinned by anxieties about Chinese geopolitical dominance (see Raghuram et al., 2014). And in some instances, they go so far as to frame Western discourses about China as racist.

This paper contributes to a multi-scalar scholarship on South–South partnerships, uncovering the productive intellectual currency that can be generated by exploring how South–South partnerships are encountered and understood 'from the middle'. Specifically, the paper progresses understandings of subaltern geopolitics within a context of increasing South–South partnerships. Reflecting Sharp (2013), we have shown the value of centring the perceptions and experiences of post-colonial elites as subaltern actors (subaltern in their positioning within an international aid system) who are dynamic contributors to rethinking and remaking the politics and power relations of contemporary global development (Craggs, 2018). In focusing on how South–South partnerships are subjectively perceived and experienced by personnel in aid-recipient governments we also advance the aid ethnography scholarship, which has been methodologically biased towards North–South partnerships. We hope to have demonstrated here that shifting the analytical gaze to 'the middle' can provide key insights to understand the challenges and opportunities that countries face in their partnerships with China, and indeed to theorise Southern aid more broadly as a new mechanism of development that remains, for the time being, unable to provide satisfactory answers to questions about emancipation across the 'South'.

Future research might explore to what extent public servants mobilise their critical understandings of South–South partnerships to resist the ideas, conditions, and programmes of Southern donors (Sou, 2022a), or trace how these attitudes

shift and transform with the rapid expansion of 'Southern' aid across the 'global South'. Future studies should also seek to query China's influence in ways that reject a lens of expansion like the one we use here. In a time to come, when China's influence is normalised, or when globally political geographies have shifted ideas of North and South, the future we fear or imagine today will be a 'former future' (Scott, 2004, p. 29), and the questions we think to ask will define new futures.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Despite the geoeconomic shifts that will undoubtedly unsettle the language in the coming decades, in this paper, we have chosen to work with the constructs of 'Northern' and 'Southern' because: this is the language used in the human geography literature on South–South partnerships, outlined above; this is the language we originally used to frame our thinking; and China's status as a 'Southern' actor is directly questioned by our interlocutors. Using the usual tropes allows us, then, to more genuinely reflect our own thinking during the research design, and to highlight the contrasts that our interlocutors see. Not challenging the trope also allows us to focus on theoretical concerns that are more central to our argument.

[2] For example, the Australian Government launched the 'Pacific Step Up' in 2018, a multi-billion-dollar programme focused on investing in renewable energy, the blue economy and infrastructure (DFAT, 2018). The UK government also rebranded its development investment arm as British International Investment (BII), which has been criticised for focusing on private-sector investment and profit-making rather than development goals and poverty reduction (Davies, 2021).

[3] Indeed, the Caribbean is adversely impacted by climate change and the intensity and frequency of hazards such as hurricanes is increasing (IPCC, 2022).

[4] For an example of the challenges of transferring policies and programmes from Southern donors to Southern recipients based on presumed similarities of economics, geography, or landscape see Shankland and Gonçalves (2016).

[5] See Sou (2022a) for research on how public servants resist racialised and geographical assumptions of development knowledge and expertise during negotiations on aid delivery between personnel in donors and aid-recipient governments.

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