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Gilbert Etienne, Chine-Inde. La grande compétition

Claudia Astarita



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Claudia Astarita

- 1 In his book, Gilbert Etienne displays his understanding of the history and contemporary developments of two countries that are among the major players on the global stage today.
- 2 Etienne is convinced that long-term predictions about either China or India are dangerous, given that most writers who have previously tried to forecast their futures have been mistaken. For this reason he prefers to base his analysis on relatively safe observations. For example, he analyses China's increasing influence on the world economy, and the changes that constant contact with the West have brought about in attitudes, the political class, and business circles in India. According to the author, while the main theme of the book has to be economic development, explaining and understanding it requires placing it in its political, demographic, and social context.
- 3 Because of the many years he spent in India and China from 1952 to 2006, the author is able use personal anecdotes to illustrate the most significant evolutions in the history of both countries, putting a special emphasis on the impact of innovation and reform on daily life in both cities and countryside. After this introduction, the reader is led through the earliest history of the two countries. The author begins with an assessment of life in imperial India and China, and follows with a balanced evaluation of the colonial period, emphasising its positive and negative aspects.
- 4 He then relates the challenges faced by key figures such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Zedong in the early years of independence. The former is described as "an exceptional leader who could have become a dictator, but behaved like a perfect democrat" (p. 49), making India into one of the most stable states in Asia. Mao Zedong, by contrast, is introduced as a "visionary who wanted to change China and the world, which led to the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution" (p. 50). This section includes an interesting description of daily life in the years of the Great Leap, and a comparison of the two countries in which the author takes into account the weight of

population, poverty, health, education, and ideological excess on the economic and social development of both.

- 5 The author concludes his historical survey with a description of China and India from 1980 to 2006. China's advantages compared to its neighbour are summed up in the first paragraph: the wiliness of Deng Xiaoping, and the presence of Hong Kong and the Asian Tigers at its door, as well as the Japanese heavyweight. However, the author does not omit the dark sides of the agrarian and industrial revolutions, which are not limited to the emergence of regional disparities in growth and income, but also include the abuse of civil and individual freedoms that led to the tragedy of Tiananmen in 1989. The author "absolves" Deng Xiaoping, however, by stating that "repression would have been considerably tougher under Mao Zedong" (p. 69). Where India is concerned, the author describes the country's emergence from a Hindu rate of growth and the reforms introduced by Manmohan Singh, first as Minister of Finance and then as Prime Minister. However, in the case of India, failure to take adequate account of poverty and backwardness also comes into play.
- 6 In what can be seen as a second thematic section of the book, the author critiques the political systems of both countries, their levels of corruption and infrastructure modernisation, and the measures introduced to protect the environment and improve conditions in the countryside and overall standards of living. Briefly, the author sees China's political future as less clear than India's, on the one hand because of the openness that characterises daily political life in India, and on the other because the future of Chinese politics is being played out within the Communist Party, whose behaviour is impossible to predict.
- 7 Moreover, the author states that "while the future of the infrastructure is clearer in China, environmental damage is even heavier than in India" (p. 152). In any case, in both countries "the environment should become a major priority in order to prevent the worsening of the situation, and at the very least to reduce present levels of damage" (p. 148). The chapter on rural life well describes the despair of farmers who feel abandoned, the victims of corruption and lack of interest in their situation.
- 8 The author concludes by saying that despite some encouraging progress, the struggle against poverty in China and India is far from won. Speculating on possible future scenarios, he limits himself to agreeing with the opinion of Jean-Luc Domenach, who believes that "while we know more or less where China is headed in the next few years [...] we don't know where she will go after that" (p. 196). This perspective implicitly describes the future of India as well.
- 9 To sum up, this is a very good book, very detailed and balanced when it comes to judging the progress and setbacks of both countries. Indeed, these details can be seen as both strong points and weak points throughout the narrative: strong in that they allow the reader to closely follow the most significant stages in the history and modern life of China and India, their successes and failures, and the challenges with which globalisation confronts them; and weak because in emphasising empirical contexts, the author renounces any attempt to insert the two countries into a broader and more significant theoretical analysis where speculation about the future is concerned. It must be recalled, however, that this is a deliberate decision on the part of the author, given his aim to rely on certain or fairly certain observations rather than to go in for risky long-term predictions.