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Title: “Infrastructure as power: the political economy of Chinese finance in Ecuador”

China’s outsized role in Latin America throughout the past decade has significantly influenced regional attempts at sustainable development, primarily through the financing and construction of large-scale infrastructure and energy systems. However, most research exploring Chinese presence in Latin America has focused on what and why questions without paying much attention to how Chinese actors have maneuvered in the region. This article evaluates the political, economic, and ideological tools through which Chinese actors gained power and leverage in Latin America, and the resulting effects on development policy predicated upon sustainability. I do this through a case study of Ecuador, the largest per capita (as a percentage of GDP) Latin American recipient of loans from the China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank since 2005. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa’s Citizen’s Revolution (2006-2017) simultaneously demonized Western lending and codified Buen Vivir ideas of alternative development and environmental sustainability into national law and public policy. Drawing on theories of the developmental state and soft power, and utilizing semi-structured elite interviews, I argue that the Ecuadorian case illustrates how Western-centric conceptualizations of power in international relations fail to capture how Chinese infrastructure finance is used to further Chinese aims in Latin America, and how an analysis of power helps explain why Correa’s ambitious Buen Vivir platform largely failed. I find that despite a political-legal platform emphasizing ecological and social sustainability and state sovereignty, Correa’s legacy refutes the essence of Buen Vivir on three levels: care for the environment, recognition of indigenous rights, and state sovereignty/self-determination. As a result, Chinese finance in Ecuador can be understood not only in terms of profit motives and soft power expansion, but also through the use of coercive hard power that alters recipient country development policy. This work re-conceptualizes how power is used in Sino-Latin American relations, evaluates the consequences for regional sustainable development models financed primarily via Chinese lending, and reviews the implications for recipient political institutions charged with creating and implementing policies aimed at promoting sustainable development. I offer a grounded understanding of how Chinese finance can shape infrastructure, energy, and development policy in Latin America.