

Introduction

History, Culture and Modernity in China

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Abstract

The article provides a short introduction to the main topics and aims of this thematic issue on history, culture and modernity in China. It outlines the multi-faceted approaches to a (or more than one) modernity between and beyond Westernisation and Sinicisation as formulated in the twentieth century, be it in Republican China, Taiwan or the People's Republic, and how this is reflected in "Western" historiography on China. For China, (re)articulations of "alternatives" would open up the possibility for more than just one single, homogenising, culturalist-essentialist (and top-down defined) "Chinese dream". Since discussions of modernity are always closely linked to the concerns of the present, shifts in global economy and politics might, in turn, also lead to new conceptions of what a "global modernity" (if such a single entity exists) should mean and how the Chinese case might relate (or contribute) to it.

Keywords: modernity, modernisation, Westernisation, Sinicisation, identity, history, China, Taiwan, Chinese dream

When the editors of this journal approached me for guest editing a special issue on "History, Culture and Modernity in China", the first thought that came to my mind was: these topics cannot be treated in the singular: too many different paths have been discussed, sometimes taken, sometimes not (as Roger Jeans once titled: "Roads not taken"),¹ too many different experiences have been made, too many different models taken over and adapted or modified sometimes to a degree hardly recognisable from the original's perspective. Historically, cultural practice has differed widely. So the decision was quickly made that at least in very broad terms three

different periods and three different experiences should be represented in this issue: Republican China, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), and finally a concluding part should look at China and the historiography of its "modernity" in a broader perspective. Since "modernity" can be understood in many ways, e.g. as a period, a concept or a problem,² but also as a state, a practice and an experience, a multi-faceted approach would give the readers of this interdisciplinary journal at least some impression of the variety of meanings the "modern" in China has come with during the twentieth century (without, of course, claiming to cover all of it), contributing to and reflecting also the larger discourse on "modernity" in general.

In terms of authorship, the idea was to invite a range of scholars specialised in modern Chinese history and culture who also represent such a multifaceted approach, bringing in different perspectives, and I am more than happy to introduce them here very briefly: Tze-ki Hon who received his early education in Hong Kong, teaches history in the US today; Lung-chih Chang who received his doctoral training in the US, now teaches history in his native Taiwan; Stefan Landsberger who was trained in the Netherlands, teaches Chinese Culture and History there; and Thoralf Klein, having received his academic training in Germany, teaches history in the UK at present. This way, different academic traditions and personal backgrounds, "insider" and "outsider" views meet on the common basis of working as historians of modern China.

The first article by Tze-ki Hon provides us with a critical evaluation of "alternative modernity" as articulated in Republican (1912-1949) times. Besides the now commonly recognised version of modernity in China, largely based on the "Western"-European model, there were also other voices which have been neglected to a large extent and only recently received more attention. They ran counter to the "master narrative" as accepted in hindsight – being "alternative" in this sense – and show that the "victory" of today's "master narrative" was by no means simply natural, but has been connected and largely due to economic and political contexts. However, Hon argues, this has also come at a price: in these counter models he finds a rich repository hidden for "alternative" ways to frame "modernity" in China, if not a (or more than one) "Chinese modernity". Instead of a clear-cut linear development which the present-day "master narrative" suggests, the ruptures and polyvalence of Republican China's search for "modernisation" (as the process to achieve modernity) and the fairly contentious relationship between modernisation and Westernisation become obvious. Looking at the specific discussions on "culture", "morality" and the

value of Chinese culture's historical trajectory on the part of the chosen intellectuals Hon focuses upon, different takes on what "modern" should mean in general and for China in particular, are profiled. Whereas some tried to integrate China into a global approach, others stressed the necessity to develop a distinctly "Chinese" way. Given China's "rise" at present, Hon suggests the external preconditions for a more assertive claim to a "Chinese modernity" – argumentatively linked back to "traditional" (understood primarily as "Confucian") culture – are there. This, however, runs the risk to fragment the concept of modernity, challenging its being a global phenomenon – a point that is again taken up by Klein in our fourth contribution.

The following article by Lung-chih Chang on Taiwan highlights the much disputed issue of any single and simple linear process of modernisation in this "other China". He tackles this problem by reconsidering the transformative process the identity of Taiwanese people went through in the twentieth century: from a single, unified (and subaltern) one as created by Japanese colonial occupation (1895-1945), through a dominant, homogenising "Chinese" (or Han) identity imposed on a *de facto* heterogeneous population from above during the martial law era (1949-1987), suppressing indigenous minorities as well as mainland fugitives vs. Taiwanese difference, to a more multiple, varied, and highly contested identity in the post-martial law era (since 1987), in fact integrating the Japanese (colonial) legacy to some degree. Modernity is part and parcel of this formative process of a postcolonial Taiwanese identity, and the article holds that Taiwan's historiography of modernity contributed substantially to the development of the new identity/identities as did bottom-up movements resisting prescribed identities, leading to a new appreciation of diversity (in terms of gender, class and ethnicity in multi-cultural Taiwan) and the reappraisal of the local. Modernity, it is also suggested here, has different faces and clearly not only means "Westernisation". For Taiwan, modernisation processes had different layers, and modernity came in different guises, notably including the (Japanese) colonial one, thus complicating also any simple and single "Chinese" modernity.

The third contribution by Stefan Landsberger on the People's Republic (1949-) takes up the issue of "modernity" by looking into the development of its projected ideals, the so-called "Chinese dream", and the attempts of the latter's realisation in social and cultural practice throughout the different phases of the PRC. This dream of "modernisation" to cure the "Sick Man of Asia" – as China had been derisively called since the nineteenth century – clearly meant very different things at different times and was reflected

accordingly in the cultural productions of the time. While the slogan of the “Chinese dream” is associated today with president Xi Jinping and considered a Chinese “answer” (or challenge) to the “American dream”, the article clearly shows how the contents of this “dream” have shifted substantially over time: early revolutionary goals modeled on Soviet approaches in tandem with a declared distancing from one’s own past to achieve “modernisation” (in the 1950s) were followed by phases of more independent experiments in revolution “Chinese-style”; all, however, mainly focused on the domestic realm. After Mao and the Cultural Revolution, the debate about the concept of “modernity”, oscillating between “Westernisation” (now often identified with “Americanisation”) and “Sinicisation” was revived. China’s present-day global ambitions which have replaced one-time revolutionary goals are based on China’s successes in economic modernisation, but the latter are increasingly explained as also indebted to a culturally grounded “Chinese way”. This links the article back to Hon’s argument on a – at least officially declared – “Chinese modernity” based on (pre-revolutionary, often termed “Confucian”) culture, though at times perceived as endowed with a potential to provide a model also for others to empower it on a global level.

The final article by Thoralf Klein zooms out to take a larger perspective in looking at “Western” historiography on China’s “modernity”. Instead of arguing for or against the feasibility of “big terms” as “master narratives” in general, he proposes to explore the tensions inherent in the concept of “modernity”. As is evidenced by the other articles, the concept of “modernity” and what it should mean for China is all but uncontested: and this is true not only for China herself, but for the Western historiography of the latter as well. The inherent tensions, for instance, become obvious when trying to highlight “modernity’s” contours in discussing its relationship with its “Other”: the non-/anti- or pre-modern, showing that instead of an assumed clear-cut opposition, there are many intersections on the empirical level, blurring the line and suggesting “modernisation” should not be conceived of as a simple wholesale change of aggregate state. By this, the concept of “modernity” reveals itself as inherently “uneven”, reflecting also tensions between the perspectives of (different) historical actors on the one hand, and historians of different localities like cities and the countryside on the other: what “modern” means in the respective perspectives is not necessarily always the same, and again it need not be wholesale or valid for all to the same degree. On a larger scale, then, the question arises whether we can talk of one “global modernity” at all and if so, whether this also means the global is or should also be shaped by “Chinese” (or other)

modernity (if any homogeneous “Chinese” modernity ever existed). In that case, the concept would be perceived beyond the usual “globalisation is Westernisation (or Americanisation)” equation, reflecting – as Hon and Landsberger have pointed out as well – also the ongoing shifts in global economy and politics.

As has become evident, discussions of modernity are always closely linked to the concerns of the present. Therefore, as Hon and Chang have argued, there should be some room for a (re)articulation of “alternatives” (hopefully in the plural and not only as a reflex to a perceived “Western standard” but also competing among themselves)³ in Chinese culture(s) today. This would open up the possibility for more than just one single, homogenising, culturalist-essentialist (and top-down defined) “Chinese dream” for the future: a vision that not only the Taiwanese would probably appreciate.

Notes

1. Roger B. Jeans, *Roads not taken: the struggle of opposition parties in twentieth-century China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).
2. Joris van Eijnatten, Ed Jonker, Willemijn Ruberg and Joes Segal, “Shaping the Discourse on Modernity,” *History, Culture and Modernity* 1 (2013): 3-20.
3. Cf. the criticism of “alternative modernities” by Gurminder Bhambra or Arif Dirlik: Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity. Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke et al.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Arif Dirlik, *Global Modernity. Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder et al.: Paradigm Publishers, 2001).

About the Author

Gotelind Müller-Saini is full professor of Chinese Studies at Heidelberg University, Germany. She has published widely on modern Chinese and Sino-Japanese cultural history. Her books include studies of Chinese author Lin Yutang’s non-fiction, of Chinese Buddhism’s struggle with “modernity” in the early twentieth century, of Chinese anarchism as a cultural movement in transnational perspective, and of the contested historical Chinese TV drama “Towards the Republic” (*Zou xiang gonghe*). Recently, she edited the volume *Designing History in East Asian Textbooks. Identity Politics and Transnational Aspirations* (London and New York: Routledge 2011; paperback 2013), and her newest monograph is *Documen-*

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