

From Westernization to globalization --- a brief history of Chinese modernity¹

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What does modernity mean to the people of China today? One possible answer, that may well reflect general opinion, would be to say that it is a confused concept that is often identified with the use of the terms “modern” and “modernization” in everyday language, and covers everything that, wrongly or rightly, is considered as scientific, technological, cultural or even political progress. For knowledgeable intellectuals, the notion, originating in Europe during the Renaissance, essentially represents a perception of time as progressive and irreversible. During the Enlightenment, this perception crystallized in the form of a philosophy of progress that founded a plan for global social emancipation on “a model for society proposed as the only rational possibility, and therefore as the better solution.” Within a restrained circle of academics, the concept of modernity thus relates to a civilisation process that has produced various theories of modernization that can be justified to various degrees. One example is the premise that was all the rage in the USA during the 1960s, according to which a process of worldwide homogenization based on industrialization, urbanization, rationalization and, first and foremost, market growth, would succeed in eradicating cultural, political, institutional, structural and social differences between nations. The modern West was soon joined in this vision by the non-Western world, willingly or otherwise.

We are concerned not with the philosophical debate over whether the notion of time has meaning or not, nor with the roots of European modernity, nor with the validity of modernization theories that have been strongly contested since the 1980s by post-modern thinkers², but with the acceptance and rejection of the notion of modernity in China itself. More specifically, we are asking why the idea of modernity is perceived by some as an historical truth that can point out the way ahead for China, and by others as an ideology of

¹ This text is published in the *Altermondes* review, No. 16, December 2008-February 2009, special report “An impossible dialogue between cultures?”.

² Post-modern thought is also the fruit of modernity, which thus holds up a mirror to itself as described by Iyaylo Dichev: “Modernity in the strict sense of the term is, amongst other definitions, an unremitting criticism of modernity itself, torn as it is between the vision of its triumph and its decline.” See Iyaylo Dichev, *Donner sans perdre. L'échange dans l'imaginaire de la modernité (Giving without losing. The exchange of modernity within the imagination)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997.

progress through the prism of which traditional Chinese culture becomes backward looking and stagnant. We want to look at the dilemma confronting China today in terms of her political leanings and relations with the West, in an inter-cultural and globalized context.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of Chinese modernity dates back to the mid-19th century. In the wake of the two Opium Wars (1840-1860) and the defeats suffered by the Chinese, Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, Zhang Zhidong and Li Hongzhang, all high-ranking mandarins during the late Qing Dynasty, initiated what was known as the *self-strengthening movement*, inspired by European technical and military supremacy. Since Chinese culture was substantial and Western culture additional, the movement was based on acquiring Western expertise in military and industrial strategy, defence and diplomacy in order to rebuild Chinese might, undermined by the gunboats and weapons of the modern West. But the 1894-1895 war against Japan brought the movement a stinging defeat. A more institutional vision replaced the idea of creating a fleet of warships. Prominent reformer Kang Youwei and his disciple Liang Qichao then proposed adopting what went on to become the 1898 Reform, which emulated the Meiji Restoration in Japan in wishing to eventually transform the Manchu Dynasty into a constitutional monarchy. This reformist movement, along with the self-strengthening movement, was described by Luo Rongqu³ as “defensive modernization” in response to Western aggression. But the 1898 Reform came to an abrupt end with the coup instigated by the Empress Dowager Cixi against Emperor Guangxu, who was in favour of reform. The modernization movement then took a new turn, that can fairly be described as a radical revolution, under the leadership of Zhongshan alongside Huang Xing and Zhang Binglin, both active revolutionaries of the era. Throughout a long process of questioning and uncertainty over the future of the Chinese nation, reformists and revolutionaries argued over gradual reform or radical revolution as the tactic to follow, but agreed on two essential points: adopting the Western concept of progressivism/evolutionism and acknowledging the backward-looking and stagnant nature of Chinese society. In other words, a mirror effect produced by the concept of modernity combined with the clash of civilisations meant that China ended up accepting the image of herself reflected by the expansionist West: the image of the *immobile Empire*.⁴ Sino-centrism gave way to euro-centrism. It is worth remembering a certain

³ Luo Rongqu (1927-1996), Chinese historian, former professor at Peking University, expert in Chinese modernisation.

⁴ See Alain Peyrefitte, *Collision of Two Civilisations: Immobile Empire*. The Harvill Press, 1993.

Arminius Vambery who, in all sincerity, paid tribute to the cultural mission of Western civilisation in the barbaric lands of the East by comparing it to Roman civilisation.⁵ Tu Weiming, Harvard philosophy professor, stresses that “the predicament of contemporary Chinese intellectuals also lies in their unquestioned commitment to a particular version of the Enlightenment of the modern West. They believe that secular humanism as exemplified by the French Revolution and its attendant positivism, utilitarianism, scientism, materialism and progressivism is the only path to China’s survival and flourishing.”⁶

The second modernization period began with the 1911 revolution that ended the two-thousand-year old Chinese imperial reign. But a change in political regime does not necessarily produce a change in political culture, and is even less likely to change the way people think. The republican revolution drove out the last emperor whilst leaving intact the principle of absolutism, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition. Sun Zhongshan, the founding father of the Republic of China, was elected its provisional president on 29 December 1911 but, under pressure from the imperial armies, handed over the reins to General Yuan Shikai, considered by many Chinese, including a number of revolutionaries, as the leader China needed. Huang Xing and other Republican leaders placed so much trust in him that they even decided to disband the southern revolutionary army. In February 1913, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) won the country’s first legislative elections. In March, Yuan Shikai had the head of the KMT, Song Jiaoren, assassinated. Song Jiaoren was at the time preparing to form a government based on the model provided by Western democracies. Yuan Shikai succeeded in having himself elected as president of the Republic and then promptly dissolved the KMT and Parliament. The provisional constitution was replaced by a new text that gave the president unlimited powers, presidency for life and the right to designate his successor. The Republic of China, the first republic in the history of Asia, was a mere shadow of a its former self, its president a military dictator enjoying unlimited power and eager to re-establish imperial rites and titles and have himself proclaimed emperor, which he did on 2 December 1915. Four years after the proclamation of the republic, China was a monarchy once again. The ancestral political culture was back in force, springing back to life like the embers of a fire that has never been put out. Although this restoration of the old regime only lasted eighty-three days, the spectre of past political culture continued to haunt China and

⁵ See Arminius Vambery, *Western Culture in Eastern Lands: a comparison of the methods adopted by England and Russia in the Middle East*, London, Murray, 1906.

⁶ Tu Weiming, “The Confucian ethic and the spirit of East Asian modernity”, *Cultural Diversity and Transversal Values: East-West Dialogue on Spiritual and Secular Dynamics* © UNESCO 2006 (CLT-2006/WS/17).

manifested itself in other forms at other times. The attempt at institutional modernization thus failed once again. Hu Shi⁷ bewailed the downfall of the young republic when he declared that “A country based on liberty and equality cannot be built by a community of slaves!”

Nevertheless, despite being marked by profound political turmoil, this period also generated significant cultural debate between traditionalists and modernists on the question of Westernization. In 1915, Chen Duxiu, a hot-headed political figure, founded the political and literary magazine *La Jeunesse* (or *New Youth*). Dedicated to the philosophy of progress, it opened its pages to the modernist (Luxun and Hu Shi) and Marxist (Li Dazhao and Mao Zedong) intelligentsia. China was soon rocked by a hugely influential event, the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Originating in a patriotic rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and the transfer of German-owned advantages and concessions to Japan, the May Fourth Movement sparked off a real political and cultural revolution, extolling science and democracy as the two foremost ideas of Western culture. This iconoclastic movement opposing Confucian tradition was the true progenitor of Chinese modernity, rather than the proclamation of the Republic of China. The two major repercussions were the creation of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the birth of a liberal thinking movement. Chen Duxiu, founding member of the CPC, and Hu Shi, prominent advocate of Chinese liberalism, were both key figures in the Fourth May Movement, and both strongly supported “total Westernization.” Hu Shi explains his position with slight reservations: “Provided that China makes an effort to adhere totally to the new civilisation of this new world, the inertia of the old culture will forge a compromise and ensure that a new culture will naturally be Chinese in nature.”⁸

Almost simultaneously, Liang Shuming, neo-Confucian thinker and philosopher, published a book based on conference notes, *The Cultures of East and West and their Philosophies*. Contrary to the popular attitude of polemicists who condemned one culture in the name of another, Liang Shuming’s thinking was rooted in cultural pluralism. By analyzing the three sorts of attitudes to life which, in his eyes, characterized Western, Chinese and Indian cultures, he distinguished three approaches that each correspond to a “vital orientation” that differs fundamentally from the two others. Western culture primarily expresses the desire

⁷ Hu Shi (1891-1962), man of letters, John Dewey disciple and translator, emblematic figure of the new vernacular literature (baihua). He was the Republic of China’s ambassador to the USA from 1938 to 1941, president of Peking University from 1946 to 1948, and in 1958 president of Academia Sinica in Taiwan.

⁸ *Cong "xihua" dao xiandaihua* (From “Westernization” to modernization), edited by Luo Rongqu, Beijingdaxue chubanshe, Beijing, 1990, p.17.

to progress, resulting in attempts to conquer and control nature, with scientific research aiming to transform the nature of things and democracy originating in the struggle against absolute power. Chinese culture is characterized by the attempt to alter, limit or moderate desires, as well as satisfaction and contentment with what existence has to offer. Indian culture conveys the renouncement of desire by questioning existence or retreating from the world. Léon Vandermeersch describes them as promethean, give-and-take and nihilist respectively.⁹ Liang Shuming's vision is also impregnated with the idea of progress, but a progress comprising stages that follow the reverse order from the usual order — the order which makes Western culture the most advanced culture. In his opinion, Western culture represents merely the first phase in the evolution of humanity, whilst Chinese and Indian cultures represent the second and third phases respectively. They are therefore, in their present state, a little premature and out of step with their time, lost in the midst of the wrong phase. Although it may be true to say that in our current era we need to take the first, Western, path, this approach needs at a fundamental level to acknowledge the second — Chinese — attitude to life so it does not risk coming to a standstill. According to Liang Shuming, all cultures evolve from the era of humans faced with the material world to the era of humans faced with each other, and from there to the era of humans faced with themselves. This is why Liang Shuming hoped for a modern revision of Confucianism “in favour of a progressivism re-rooted in the values of Chinese tradition,”¹⁰ persuaded that “Confucianism can convey the values of humanity's culture of the future, culture that will go beyond strict scientific knowledge and pure individualism to awaken in humankind awareness of an ontological communion with the universe and a sense of the social primacy of mutual help.”¹¹

A body of thought thus existed in 1930s China that was close to the social-democrat movement, according the same importance to freedom and social justice. Several plans for society originating in the May Fourth Movement then began to clash, to the background of a fratricidal war between nationalists and communists. But this political and intellectual debate over the path that China should follow for her future development fizzled out. Japan, having occupied Manchuria in 1931, went on to subject China to a massive and bloody invasion in 1937. The patriotic fervour created by the urgent need to save the threatened nation

⁹ See Léon Vandermeersch's preface in *Les cultures d'Orient et d'Occident et leurs philosophies (The Cultures of East and West and their Philosophies)* by Liang Shuming, PUF, Institut Marcel Granet collection, 2000, p.XV.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p.XII.

¹¹ Ibidem, p.XVII.

overshadowed “the study of the Enlightenment” and brought attempts to foster a modernization that was already faltering to an abrupt halt.

The third period of Chinese modernization — what we can call the socialist era — began with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Despite many tribulations due to the practices inflicted by Maoist socialism, there are those who try to justify this brand of socialism by stressing its modernity. Wang Hui believes that “The socialism of Mao Zedong is presented on the one hand as an ideology of modernisation, on the other as a criticism of the capitalist modernisation of Europe and the United States... The socialist thought of Mao Zedong is to some extent a theory of modernity set against capitalist modernisation.”¹² This interpretation is based on the fact that communism and capitalism, like two rivals in the race for modernization, both originate in an ideology of progress that holds out the promise of a better world. As of 1955, China did indeed seem to be engaging in a race for modernization with the West. Mao urged China to “overtake England and catch up with the USA” with the watchword being “to focus industry on steel production”, implying recognition on some level that Western civilisation had reached an advanced phase of development. But the mass movement known as the Great Leap Forward plunged China into the depths of an economic recession followed by unprecedentedly widespread famine that caused at least 30 million deaths. During the 1960s and 70s, China continued to turn her back on the economic system proffered by capitalism, despite Japan’s impressive growth during the same period. The agricultural reform launched in December 1978, in a context that was in many respects problematic, represented a repudiation of Maoist socialism on the economic level. The people’s communes were gradually dismantled, and peasants once again had the right to cultivate the land they owned and sell their produce freely. Opening the door to private initiative in this way unleashed the power of the peasant population and created a vast array of local industries. Deng Xiaoping’s policy of reform and openness applied the market economy to other sectors, such as creating special economic parks on the coast, partially for the use of foreign companies, liberalizing the services sector, privatizing state companies on the brink of bankruptcy, and using low-paid workers without social protection. This multi-faceted turn to the right accelerated China’s economic development with negative side effects

¹² Wang Hui, see Wang Hui, "Dangdai zhongguo de sixiang zhuangkuang he xiandaixing wenti" (Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity), in *Zhishifenzi lichang - ziyoushuji zhizheng yu zhongguo sixiangjie de fenhua* (The positions of the intellectuals – Debate on liberalism and the scission among the Chinese intelligentsia), Changchun, Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 1999, p.90.

including widespread corruption, personal appropriation of public property, expropriation of arable land for the purposes of real estate development, the massive migration of the rural population to the cities, geographical inequalities and a deepening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Nevertheless, China's GDP multiplied tenfold between 1978 and 2004.

IMMOBILISM OR EVOLUTION

There is currently a feeling that Western modernity is coming to an end, at a time when the ideology of progress that underpins it is spreading to the rest of the world and set to take on a universal dimension in the wake of economic and cultural globalization. In this highly paradoxical context, several voices are being raised in China denouncing an ideology of progress that authorizes value judgements on the different cultures of the world. "Where culture is concerned," states Heqing,¹³ "the notions of progress and backwardness do not apply. There is no gap between Chinese and Western culture, just differences."¹⁴ He thus advocates a cultural nationalism that aims to rehabilitate and re-legitimize traditional Chinese culture. He suggest that "China should retain Chinese culture as her substance, and only learn from the science and advanced technology of the West, or possibly emulate Western mechanisms for managing society."¹⁵ This vision of the world, in no way new, is part of the movement to protect national identity in response to globalization not only of the West's economic system, but also of its supposedly universal values. In practice, this objection, in a country like China, could lead to a development strategy characterized by cultural conservatism, economic liberalism and state authoritarianism.

Zhou Ning¹⁶ describes the Chinese dilemma in these terms: "What China aspires to is modernization and not Westernization; however, modernization is itself a form of Westernization. This means that the Chinese modernization movement is immediately bogged down in an inextricable intrinsic contradiction. When it comes to modernization, Chinese culture has to choose not between evolution and death, but between dying within immobilism or within evolution. Modernized China can progress or evolve, but she will no longer be

¹³ Heqing (1958-), professor of art history at The University of Zhejiang.

¹⁴ Heqing, "Mengmei de qimengzhe" (The Misguiding Light), <http://arts.tom.com/1004/200687-27738.html>.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Zhou Ning (1961-), professor of Chinese literature at the University of Xiamen.

China, she will become a different culture, and the Chinese a different race.”¹⁷ The fact that no doubt escapes Zhou Ning’s notice is that, whilst modernization certainly partially incorporates Westernization, the modernization process cannot be wholly identified with Westernization insofar as it also implies a process of rationalization and adaptation to the existing elements of traditional culture. This process is far from unimportant. Japan’s experience shows that successful modernization is a process whereby tradition and modernity nourish each other. China’s experience in the first three quarters of the 20th century reveals the two-way failure of one-way modernization: either the inertia of tradition destroys modernity, as was the case with the restoration of the imperial regime four years after the proclamation of the Republic of China in 1911, or modernity destroys traditional culture, as did Maoist socialist practices. Neo-Confucianism is creating a process of dialogue and interaction between tradition and modernity in China. “The more modernization progresses in China,” stresses Luo Rongqu, “the more she is led to take a new look at the tradition that has built up over history.”¹⁸ We should not forget that cultural change is not always the result of importing elements from another culture, but is sometimes the product of internal opposition and resistance, or at least of misgivings about the culture, the rectification of mistakes or alteration of the direction taken. This is what is known in intercultural terms as antagonistic acculturation. In Mao’s time, Chinese policy focused on the class struggle, a position rooted in rejection of Western democracy as well as revolutionary fervour, and one that generated a succession of political movements which had serious human consequences. During the era of Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, Chinese policy reacted against extreme Maoism by refocusing on economism and consumerism, a reaction that appeared to trigger another deviation. From 1979 to 2007, China’s annual growth rate averaged at 9.8% (Chinese GDP reached 3,280 billion dollars in 2007, making China the world’s fourth largest economic power), but this “great boom forward” has gone hand in hand with escalating disparities between the rich and the poor. The Gini index has reached 0.47 in China and is still climbing, far exceeding the 0.4 acceptable limit. “That which initially serves to counter pain thus becomes that which causes people’s pain.”¹⁹ Now more than ever, China needs to look to the Confucian idea of the middle way, hence the new policy with the mission of “constructing a harmonious society.” However, it should be stressed that this plan for society, which may

¹⁷ Zhou Ning, “Tingzhi huo jinbu : Zhongguo xiandaixing de tazhe kunjing” (Immobilism or progress: the image of others and the dilemma of Chinese modernity), www.chinese-thought.org/zwsx/006056.htm

¹⁸ See Luo Rongqu’s preface in *Cong "xihua" dao xiandaihua* (From “Westernization” to modernization), Beijingdaxue chubanshe, Beijing, 1990, p.35.

¹⁹ Liang Shuming, *Les cultures d'Orient et d'Occident et leurs philosophies (The Cultures of East and West and their Philosophies)*, PUF, Institut Marcel Granet coll., 2000. p.236.

appear unclear and indefinable, necessarily implies greater respect for the ideal of the rule of law.

IN THE MELTING POT OF GLOBALIZATION

“We are condemned to modernization.” These words from Octavio Paz²⁰, both laconic and bitter, admirably express the feeling of old nations such as China, finding themselves at the crossroads of their destiny, towards their forced participation in a perilous adventure. But although modernization was initially an involuntary choice forcefully imposed by the Western world, China has since undergone a great many trials and tribulations to make it her own. The adventure of modernization is as perilous as ever, but has now become a voluntary choice decided on by China with determination, convinced that she can resuscitate her glorious past to light up tomorrow’s world. However, China first needs to shed light on her own path by switching constantly between tradition and modernity in search of an ‘alternative modernity’, even if it means reviving certain values that are not associated with modernity. These values include altruism, solidarity, sympathy, compassion, empathy, loyalty, harmony with nature and an attitude of responsibility towards others. And they do not tend to form part of the modern human being, a purely economic and purely self-seeking subject. China obviously does not have a monopoly on these so-called pre-modern values. Nevertheless, a number of negative effects of modernity spring from the cult of self and individualism by destroying the old social structures, and the fact that Confucianism epitomizes the concept of relationship with others means that it should be able to help revive people’s awareness of their responsibilities to others in the search for the common good. China needs to make her ancient civilisation a source of inspiration for this ‘alternative modernity’ — an alternative that needs to be forged in the melting pot of modernization and globalization — and to harness her survival and future to humanity’s shared destiny, on the basis of respect for the planet’s cultural diversity and of democracy and peace.

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²⁰ Octavio Paz (1914-1998), Mexican poet and writer, winner of the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature.