

China's Road to Modernity: From Empire to Republic (1817–1949)

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Our modern-day fascination with China derives in large part from its recent rise as a modernised global power. Indeed, such terms as 'the rise of China' or 'modern China' are almost ubiquitous if one lives in today's West. Perhaps as a result of this new public interest, increasing numbers of academics have been attracted to research China and its modernity. Some fundamental questions, however, arise: What does it mean when we talk about 'modernity' in China? Is China's modernity any different from Western modernity? If so, what is China's place in the long process of global modernisation? For those who are interested in China's past, these questions are often reduced to the long-lasting debate on Chinese social, economic and intellectual history: Was China 'stagnant' before its historic encounter with the expanding West in the nineteenth century? Or was it undergoing its own form of journey towards modernity? To interpret these questions in another way: When did modern China begin? How do we explain China's road to modernity (which doesn't have to be a one-way road)?

A conventional view dates the beginning of modern China from the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, following the First Anglo-Chinese War (1840–1842, commonly known as the First Opium War). The great German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed that before the Opium War China was essentially a 'traditional' society that was similar to the pre-capitalist West. In his view, unlike Western countries, China was

I. INDO-CHINESE MISCELLANEA.

OFFICIAL PAPER FROM THE CANTON GOVERNMENT RESPECTING OPIUM, DATED APRIL 5, 1820.—YUEN, the Viceroy, and AH, the Hoppo of Canton, hereby issue a proclamation to the Hong merchants, with the contents of which let them make themselves fully acquainted.

Opium is an article which has long been most strictly prohibited by his Imperial Majesty's command, and frequent proclamations have been issued against it, which are on record. But the passages on the coast of Canton being very numerous; Macao being the resort of foreigners; and Whampoa being the anchorage for foreign ships, should be more strictly watched and searched.

"I. Indo-Chinese Miscellanea." *Indo - Chinese Gleaner* Oct. 1820: 403+. *China from Empire to Republic*.

stagnant, unable to make its own transition into a rational modern entity until it received this transformative shock from the outside. About half a century later, in the 1950s and 1960s, a school of American sinologists led by John K. Fairbank (1907–1991) elaborated on Weber's view and developed what became known as 'modernisation theory'. Compared to Weber's typical nineteenth-century view of 'the West and the Rest', this theory showed a greater appreciation of China's unique political and cultural achievements and was less loaded with ethnocentric value judgements. It was still based, however, on the model of 'Western modernity', from which Fairbank and his fellow scholars developed their narrative about the 'impact of the West' and 'China's response to the West'. In this interpretation, the pre-1840 China was still assumed to be largely stagnant and backward, so that it

had to 'respond' to the challenge of the West in order to become modern. The Western impact on Chinese history, therefore, continued to be seen in positive terms, because it facilitated China's 'modernisation'.

This traditional view of seeing the Opium War as the dividing line between pre-modern and modern Chinese history, although still influential in some parts of the world, had its critics in both the West and the East. Philip A. Kuhn (1933–2016), one of Fairbank's students, refused to accept that China's modernisation was brought from the outside. Looking closely at China's internal changes from the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, Kuhn argued in his famous book *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China* that China's modern age started 'no earlier than 1864, the year the Taiping Rebellion was destroyed'.¹ The Opium War, therefore, should not be regarded as the key event leading China to its age of modernity. Naitō Konan (1866–1934), an eminent Japanese scholar from Kyoto University, shared Kuhn's view that the pre-modern and modern periods of Chinese history should not be demarcated by external events. Konan argued that, if one could discover evidence of modernity in China before 1840, then it would prove the conventional view incorrect. He looked back to the Song Dynasty (960–1279), a great age in which China witnessed a series of technological innovations, the rise of commercial wealth, and the replacement of hereditary aristocracy by a system of meritocracy. It was these 'elements' of modernity that allowed Konan to locate China's transition to modernity in the ninth and tenth centuries and hence to maintain that China actually anticipated Europe's modern age by several centuries. Konan's view, although innovative and non-Euro-centric, struggled to explain why these new trends and changes emerged in the Song Dynasty, and, particularly, why China declined in subsequent centuries after it had entered a 'modern' era.

In recent decades, social and economic historians have increasingly been turning their focus to the late Ming and Qing period (or 'late imperial China'), in which they hope to find out how China became modern. As opposed to the approaches based on either external or internal events, these scholars advocated a more holistic view of Chinese history. They maintained that the long period from the

1550s to the 1930s constituted a coherent whole, because, in these nearly four centuries, indigenous causes of change, together with those imposed from outside, drove China to a series of dramatic social transformations—the urbanisation of the lower Yangzi area, the development of regional and interregional trade, the growth of mass literacy and the increase in the number of the gentry, and so on. According to these scholars, it was these social and economic developments starting from the late Ming period that gradually led China into the modern era and 'set in motion administrative and political changes that continued to develop over the course of the [Qing] and in some ways culminated in the social history of the early twentieth century'.²

The above-mentioned conventional and revisionist views of China's modernity have revealed many significant aspects of the rise of China from the pre-modern to the modern age, but, meanwhile, even viewed as a whole, this scholarship is far from perfect. In particular, in explaining how China became modernised, the existing literature tends to look at either a *courte durée* that 'centred on the drama of "great events"',³ such as the years around the Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion, or a *Longue durée* spanning three to four centuries. The very critical process in which China was transformed from a nineteenth-century imperial dynasty into a globally engaged modern power has to some extent been under-researched. In other words, a *moyenne durée* scope is missing in this scholarship.

This flaw in current research, of course, cannot be attributed to a lack of wisdom in the academics involved. As the Chinese saying goes, 'Qiaofu nanwei wumi zhi chui (Even the most competent housewife cannot cook a meal without rice)',⁴ concentrated *moyenne durée* research on China's journey to modernity would not have been possible without a sufficient amount of easily accessible primary sources.

This new Gale digital collection *China from Empire to Republic: Missionary, Sinology, and Literary Periodicals (1817–1949)* will be extremely significant to researchers of China and the wider field. With its focus on a 132-year period, a not-too-long not-too-short timespan that

¹ Philip A. Kuhn, *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: militarization and social structure, 1796–1864* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 8.

² William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: the Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009), p. 5.

³ Fernand Braudel, *On History*, translated by Sarah Matthews (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 28.

⁴ Or its English equivalent, 'One cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.'

does not start from the traditional dividing line in 1840, this collection offers a wealth of precious historical sources that minutely recorded the most critical phase in China's road to modernity. If one is familiar with this period of Chinese history, 1817 is the year that the Amherst embassy, the second British embassy to China, was rejected by the Qing court. It was this journey into the heartland of China that provided British travellers, including Robert Morrison (1782–1834), the first Protestant missionary in China and the founder of *Indo-Chinese Gleaner* (印中搜聞, 1817–1822), with solid first-hand evidence of the Qing Dynasty's decline. The year 1949 is when the Chinese Civil War concluded with the victory of the Communist Party, which allowed Mao Zedong to declare the founding the People's Republic of China and proclaim that 'the Chinese people have stood up'. In between these years, it was China's 'century of humiliation'. Foreign incursions—the two Opium Wars (1840–1842; 1856–1860) and the two Sino-Japanese Wars (1894–1895; 1937–1945)—as well as a series of domestic upheavals, most notably the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), radically transformed the country. In consequence, thousands of years of imperial China ended in a globally interconnected modern world.

China from Empire to Republic provides first-hand accounts written by both prominent figures and common people who lived through this crucial period in the history of Chinese modernity. These uniquely valuable sources are presented in seventeen English-language periodicals published by Western and Chinese authors inside and outside of China. Although their backgrounds varied, they shared experience in cross-cultural communication between China and the West at different levels. It was these individuals that, in one way or another, witnessed, recorded, and even contributed to the transformation of China from a declining, 'traditional' society into a modernised power on the global stage. Contributors to these journals can generally be categorised into the following groups:

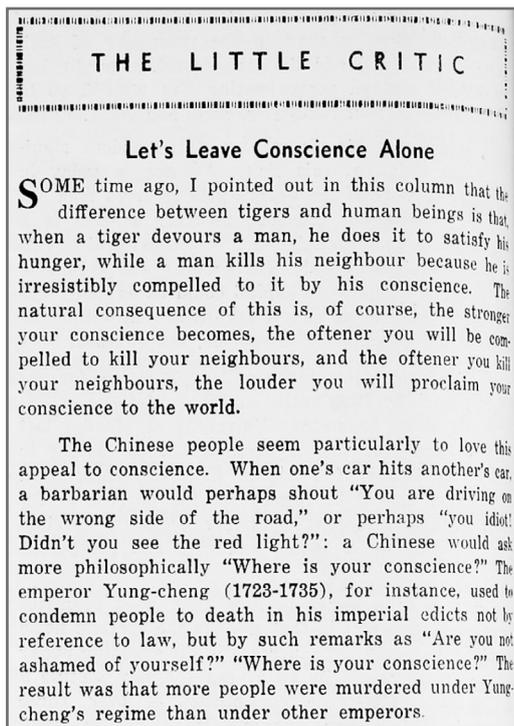
First, Western missionaries who spent a long time in China, trying to understand the country from within and even to help its progression towards modernity. In this regard, relatively unknown Protestant missionaries travelled to and lived in various corners of China. They produced *The Chinese Recorder* (教務雜誌,



"Robert Morrison." *Chinese Recorder* Apr. 1907: 180. *China from Empire to Republic*.

1867–1941) and *The West China Missionary News* (華西教會新聞, 1899–1943), two of the most important accounts for us to understand rural and western China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In major cities and cultural centres such as Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai, a number of influential missionary educators established universities and schools according to the Western model. Among others, *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* (輔仁英文學志, 1926–1934) and *The Yenching Journal of Social Studies* (燕京社會學界, 1938–1950) are two superb sources that provide unique insights into Christian higher education in China.

Second, renowned sinologists who had experience in China but later returned to the West, promoting knowledge about China and Chinese culture in Western societies. Most notably, James Legge (1815–1897), the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University who translated the *Analects* and other Confucian classics into English, and Herbert A. Giles (1845–1935), inventor of the Wade-Giles Chinese Romanisation system, were leading figures in the field of Chinese studies at the time. Together with other prominent sinologists such as Joseph Edkins, Ernst Faber and Edward Parker, they wrote extensively for *The China Review* (中國評論, 1872–1901), arguably the first major Western journal of sinology, and its sequel *The New China Review* (新中國評論, 1919–1922). These two journals are vital to any study of Western scholarship on China for the period from the late Qing to the early Republican years.



Yu-T'ang, Lin. "The Little Critic." *China Critic* 20 Apr. 1933: 406+. *China from Empire to Republic*.

Third, Chinese intellectuals who received education in the West or were influenced by Western thinking, trying to 'save' China from its political, economic and cultural crisis and to transform the nation towards modernity. These scholars, including Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培 1868–1940), president of Peking University, Lin Yu-tang (林語堂 1895–1976), a prominent writer and translator, and a group of American-educated Chinese scholars, were both eye-witnesses of and key contributors to China's transition from an imperial dynasty to a modernised nation. Their observations on contemporary affairs and attempts to promote mutual understanding between China and the West, as presented in such major journals as *The China Critic* (中國評論週報, 1928–1946), *The China Quarterly* (英文中國季刊, 1935–1941) and *T'ien Hsia*

Monthly (天下月刊, 1935–1941), were invaluable assets to academics who are interested in this unique period that gave rise to today's modern China.

In conclusion, *China from Empire to Republic* is an invaluable collection of much-needed historical sources that enable scholars across academic disciplines to research China according to their own individual needs. With a unique *moyenne durée* scope which focuses on the most critical period in China's road to modernity, *China from Empire to Republic* offers approximately 160,000 pages of new sources, as well as new perspectives for researchers to contribute to the debates which will be fundamental to any research about China.

About the Contributor

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