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Defining modern Chinese culture

By the start of the twenty-first century, China's status as a major international economic and political power was beyond dispute. China now manufactures everything from microchips to motor vehicles, and the 'Made in China' label is found in all corners of the world. Along with this economic influence, China's role in global political and cultural affairs is becoming both more significant and increasingly visible. China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics is just one of the more obvious manifestations of this impact. Chinese cultural products, ideas, customs and habits are steadily spreading around the world in the wake of China's economic and political reach. The chapters in this book explore the key domains in Chinese culture and reveal the dynamism produced by a formidable culture's interaction with both its own ancient, albeit never static, traditions and the flood of new global cultural influences. The connection between global economic and political weight and the changes in China's cultural realm are complex and profound. To understand contemporary China – an absolute necessity if one is to understand the world today – it is vital to appreciate the evolution of modern Chinese culture.

Interest in Chinese literature, philosophy, cinema, *qigong* and other cultural artefacts around the world is stronger now than ever before. There has been a plethora of books about Chinese culture published in anglophone countries and a steady increase in students enrolling in courses on Chinese language and civilization. This trend is set to continue. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, by the beginning of 2007 the number of foreign students studying Chinese had reached 30 million, and is set to rise to 100 million before 2010. The Chinese government is investing considerable financial and human resources in its promotion of Chinese language and culture, best seen in the expansion

of the government-sponsored Confucius Institutes, which since the in-auguration of the scheme in 2004 had grown to 145 by April 2007.[1]

Not surprisingly, in tandem with this upsurge of interest in 'things Chinese', there has also been an assertion of traditional elements, so that Chinese culture is projected as a unifying and largely static phenom-enon with contemporary culture reproducing and modernizing relics of China's historical past. The choice of the title 'Confucius Institute' is indicative of this homogenizing and backward-looking trend. The name itself implies a certain kind of Chinese culture that is to be promoted. Confucius' teaching has for some two thousand years been synonymous with the orthodox aspects of Chinese culture, and in that time it has been a philosophy that gave the appearance of a unitary way of life in the hugely diverse regions of China. Chinese governments have long tend-ed to lean more towards unity than diversity in their pronouncements about China and Chinese culture. Certainly, the current Communist Party (CCP) leaders are investing considerable resources in spreading this particular take on Chinese culture.

While most governments and education systems produce narratives of fixed 'national cultures', in fact cultures are in a perpetual state of change; and in the last hundred years the culture of China has changed more fundamentally and rapidly than at any other time in its long past. This is what makes modern Chinese culture such a fascinating subject. Certainly the contributors to this volume regard Chinese culture as dy-namic and diverse, and they demonstrate that dynamism and variety in their chapters. They show the continued evolution of Chinese culture in vastly different directions, driven by internal forces that are in constant interaction with influences from outside China's borders. Indeed, the notion of 'Chinese culture' is so unstable that when I began the project of editing this volume, my central problem was to decide precisely what constituted modern Chinese culture. I was presented with the par-adox of trying to pinpoint a phenomenon that was in a constant state of flux.

For large parts of the twentieth century, Western thinking on China was dominated by a fascination with her past glories such as Confucian philosophy and Tang poetry, or with Orientalist horrors such as images of Fu Manchu and bound feet. However, in the last few decades, with greater ease of travel in and out of Mainland China, such stereotypes have been largely dismantled and China's civilization has been increasingly demystified. Current interest focuses upon contemporary trends and is

one of the keys to futurology, as China's vast potential economic power is translated into the reshaping of the world's global political order. Furthermore, academic research on Chinese culture covers topics that span the whole spectrum of society, ranging from the uses of museums of local folk exhibits to major historical ruins such as Yuanmingyuan, the Old Summer Palace which was burned down by British and French troops in 1860. Given the huge variety of manifestations of Chinese culture, the number of potential cultural sites for examination is endless. The sixteen chapters that follow are therefore not exhaustive, but are grouped around significant issues that together aim to give a holistic picture of Chinese culture today. Rather than attempting to be comprehensive, we have worked on the notion of change, so that all contributors show to varying degrees how their subject matter has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Why the focus on the twentieth century? To answer this question, it is perhaps best to outline our understanding of each of the concepts 'modern', 'Chinese' and 'culture'.

Modern

At first glance, the concept 'modern' should not present many problems since it should really be a matter of definition only. In English, the word 'modern' stems from the Latin '*modo*', which means 'recently' or 'of late'. In the study of European history, however, the 'recent' goes a bit further back. The start of the modern era is generally fixed with reference to the French Revolution of 1789 and/or the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century. 'Modern culture' therefore describes a way of life that is still practised now, but is distinctly different from that before the Industrial Revolution.

In Chinese historical studies, especially in the periodization favoured by the CCP, the term '*jindai*' (literally the near-generation) is often used for 'modern'. However, this is taken to refer to the period between the Sino–British Opium War of 1840–1842, after which relations between China and the West became irrevocably enmeshed, and the May Fourth Movement of 1919, in which new ideas from Japan and the West were imported and re-evaluated against traditional values. In daily speech, the term *xiandai*, which translates as 'the period that has just been revealed', is the most common term for 'modern'. For example, modernization translates as '*xiandaihua*' in Chinese. In historical studies, however, *xiandai* often refers more specifically to the decades between 1919 and 1949,

when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established. And 1949 is then taken to mark the beginning of the contemporary '*dangdai*' (the current-generation) era.[2]

These three historical junctures each have their merits as the point of the start of 'modern China', but each implies a political position that does not necessarily reflect the actual cultural situation in China. If we are to take a periodization that is defined by cultural factors, none of the above is suitable – a different schema is required. I argue that it is most appropriate to place modern Chinese culture as beginning around 1900. While the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century saw the increasing military presence of Western powers in China, culturally, the nation remained largely unchanged. I will not go into detail here, since in the next chapter Peter Zarrow performs an admirable task of providing the historical background to the closing years of the nineteenth century. However, even when the Europeans were dictating the terms of trade after each victorious military encounter with the Chinese, the material and mental landscapes of ordinary people remained largely untouched. The imperial and other mechanisms of governance, such as the civil service examination system, were still in place, and the voices of those advocating system-wide political and social change only became audible towards the end of that century.

Similarly, while the 'May Fourth Movement' around 1919 produced an unprecedented enthusiasm for new ideas, the groundwork had been established in the two preceding decades. While the May Fourth Movement gave rise to extremely important intellectual and political trends in China, including the birth of the Communist Party, the figures who had the most influence on the young at this time were without doubt late nineteenth-century reformists such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, whose writings had converted not only the young emperor of the time, but also the revolutionaries. In fact, Mao Zedong called himself 'Kang Liang' for a time to demonstrate his debt to these late Qing thinkers.

Likewise, the third point often cited as the start of the 'contemporary' era – the establishment of the PRC in 1949 – does not adequately mark the turning point in terms of China's culture. Chinese society had fundamentally changed before 1949, and the CCP's success was a manifestation of this 'modern' transformation rather than the commencement of it. Even though the Communist regime claimed to be making a complete break with traditional thought, its history shows clear continuities with the immediate and distant past. Moreover, even if we assume that

'modern' equates to a readiness to engage openly with the world, under CCP rule China has only really actively joined the 'modern' world with the advent of Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy in the early 1980s.

There are compelling reasons for taking 1900 as the starting point of modern Chinese culture. As stated above, at the end of the nineteenth century late Qing reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were already calling for new ways of thinking and government, and this was also a time when major thought currents such as Social Darwinism were translated into Chinese by figures such as Yan Fu. While they advocated the introduction of Western thought into China, these men were solidly grounded in traditional Chinese learning. This was thus a time when the interaction between Chinese and Western ideas fired the imagination of a whole generation. When the May Fourth radicals vigorously promoted the twin Western saviours – 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy' – as idols to be emulated by the young, this was done as a deliberate elevation of the Western cultural norms that were to replace Chinese standards and values. Likewise, the CCP also intended to wipe out all vestiges of feudal China, which were to be replaced by Marxism, another Western import. Nonetheless, whatever time frame we adopt to limit the scope of 'modern Chinese culture', the term still implies something that is based on something 'Chinese'. Indeed, whatever system is adopted, China continued to be 'Chinese', and despite the increasing modernization in the twentieth century, many core traditions continued to characterize the landscape. Indeed, had Kang Youwei succeeded in 1898 in his bid to introduce his form of 'original' Confucianism nationally, the new millennium might have seen a Great Commonwealth founded on a Confucian renaissance, similar to the modernization programme of the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Even though the so-called 100 Days Reform of 1898 did not succeed, it did mark the beginnings of 'modern' (with hints of Western) modes of both thinking and behaving while remaining Chinese.

In addition, in the years immediately before and after 1900, there was also a deliberate attempt to evaluate Chinese civilization holistically and from a perspective that many intellectuals of the time explicitly considered 'modern'. In the last few years of the nineteenth century, reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao took a comprehensive and radical look at Chinese culture in the hope that it could be integrated productively into the world. At the same time, it was only at the start of the twentieth century that thinkers began to be concerned about defining a national identity. As Prasenjit Duara deftly shows in Chapter 3, ideas

of nation and Chinese identity were ferociously advocated and debated throughout the century.

While I have stressed the importance of Chinese–Western interaction as one aspect of the advent of the modern period in China, Westernization does not automatically produce modernity. In many ways, the modern age became more 'Chinese', in the sense that people living in Chinese communities became more nationalistic and at times more inward looking. Thus, ironically, the 'internationalism' of the twentieth century created a self-conscious and sometimes fiercely expressed nationalism in China – from the xenophobic Boxers of 1900 right up to the pathologically Sinocentric radicals of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s and the 'China Can Say "No"' crowd of the late 1990s. There were times when the Centre could barely hold, such as the warlord period of the 1920s, and times when central control was strictly enforced, as seen in the early Communist period.

In this volume I have resisted the commonplace custom of dividing the twentieth century into 'modern' (Republican) and 'contemporary' (Communist). While the Nationalist–Communist divide can serve as a convenient means of viewing the major political juncture of the twentieth century, in cultural terms the complexities of both eras contain elements that are more than just Imperial, Nationalist or Communist. Indeed, these descriptors are often confusing or downright misleading. Modern Chinese culture, as I have argued above, included elements from the imperial era. Similarly, some of the most interesting ideas and practices of the Communist experiment came from the 1930s and 1940s. And the PRC has seen so many changes and diverse practices that it too cannot be easily slotted into one homogeneous 'culture'. As Arif Dirlik demonstrates in Chapter 8, the theorizing of, and commentaries upon, socialism in China have undergone tremendous changes in the twentieth century, and not always because of utilitarian imperatives of nation-building.

Taking the twentieth century and beyond as the modern frame has other interesting implications. The extraordinary developments in the Chinese world – indeed in the world in general – over the last few decades have meant that the new millennium has already witnessed a Chinese culture that was unimaginable only a few generations ago. The speed with which even the physical landscape is changing is equalled only by the psychological transformations that many have had to undergo. This is especially true of the last decade. Liu Kang's chapter on the

phenomenal developments in television and the Internet illustrates the degree to which cyber culture has penetrated and transformed the lives of ordinary Chinese, particularly the urban young. The frequent claims of a spiritual vacuum by political leaders and public intellectuals are a reminder that there is indeed a crisis of recognition. The unrelenting and drastic transformations, both physical and mental, have left many reeling from a state of future shock.

Not only has Mainland China changed; its peripheries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are becoming even more varied. Voices advocating an independent identity are heard from the former, while the latter have become more integrated and interdependent with the Mainland. The diasporic communities have also transformed beyond recognition. What were mainly groups from coastal regions of Guangdong and Fujian are now joined by people from the interior, speaking dialects that the old communities would not have understood. More importantly, the 'cultural level' – to be defined more precisely in the section on 'culture' – of the new diaspora is very different from that of the old. But of course there are many things happening now that are still 'traditional' and 'modern', and this book in capturing the twentieth century as modern does occasionally hark back to 'traditional' times, as well as what is happening in the twenty-first century, to explain 'modern' China.

Chinese

While defining the term 'modern' presents problems, the concept of 'Chinese' is even more difficult to pin down. In English, the word 'China' seems to have derived from the Qin (pronounced 'chin') Dynasty (221–206 BC), the first Chinese dynasty in which the various states that had previously existed were unified as one Chinese empire. This was also the period during which indirect contacts were made between the Chinese and Roman empires by way of the silk route. In Chinese, 'China' (Zhongguo) literally means the Middle Kingdom (or centring nation, if the idea of the emperor or capital city being a magnetic centre is accepted), giving rise to Sino-centric sentiments among many Chinese. Of course, over the centuries, the 'centre' of the country shifted, most often along the Yellow River in the north or the Yangtze River in the south. Nevertheless, for millennia, the Chinese empire referred to the geographical area covering regions around these two rivers. Within this area, myriad and dissimilar groups of peoples, languages and ways of life existed and continue

to exist. Yet these groups all describe themselves as Chinese, in the same way that the large variety of peoples and entities in Europe call themselves European. To make matters even more complicated, just as 'European' can describe cultures that are outside Europe, so too is 'Chinese' an adjective that can travel the globe. Nonetheless, its origins stem from the Chinese empire.

The contributors to this volume are cognizant of the fact that 'Chinese' contains remnants of imperial times when 'China' was not only the centre of the world, but also 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), a term that indicated the traditional Chinese view of the world: that the Chinese civilization was all there was in the universe. However, we are more concerned here with analysing current perceptions and realities. Mostly, we describe people and things in the People's Republic of China (PRC). We are also keenly aware that as well as qualifying people and things in China, the term 'Chinese' can also describe people of the 'national minorities' and the Chinese diaspora, scattered around the world, and ideas and things that may or may not have come out of China. The 'national minorities' aside, the diversity of Chinese ethnicities sets the scene for discarding the notion of an essential and fixed Chineseness. Debates about what it means to be Chinese have raged for decades. They continue right into the present time, and will no doubt intensify as the PRC and Taiwanese leaderships believe that it is more advantageous to govern a people with a more unified identity. However, as William Jankowiak shows in Chapter 5, while the Chinese state would like its people to be more culturally centric and converge towards some Confucian norm, in reality, even the Han Chinese are composed of people with variant languages and habits. The notion of ethnic, and therefore 'minority', identity is a fluid and contested one. Thus, again, 'change' provides the key to our discussions.

Often, people's self-perceptions are transformed by social forces beyond their control. However, there are times when they actively want to adopt a different persona, for example by assuming the customs and appearances of foreign cultures. A recent article from the *Washington Post* about new housing developments in China entitled 'Developers Build Ersatz European, American Communities for the New Middle Class' articulates this phenomenon graphically:

> The ding-dong from the neo-Gothic church next door signals
> to Wu Yuqing that it's time to wake up. On her way to the grocery
> store each day, she walks past the Cob Gate Fish & Chip shop and
> bronze statues of Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale and

William Shakespeare. Tall men decked out in the red uniforms of the
Queen's Guard nod hello.

The place looks a lot like a small town on the Thames River, but
Wu's new home is actually in a suburb of Shanghai…

Shanghai's plan is… [to build]… a ring of satellite developments
modeled after different parts of Europe, including German, Czech,
Spanish and Scandinavian districts, in addition to the one that looks
like London, known as Thames Town.[3]

The writer of this article calls these new townships 'ersatz', casting doubt on the authenticity not only of the buildings, but by implication of the cultural affectations of the residents. The article makes quite plain that the residents of these townships do not know anything about the European cultures that they aspire towards. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to ask: are these townships Chinese or European? Clearly, the article suggests they are Chinese, or fake Western as best. The word ersatz implies that. Suppose these townships were full of pale Englishmen, blonde Germans etc, living as they did in the old foreign concessions in Shanghai? Would they be considered European or still Chinese? That is to say, would these townships then be part of European or Chinese culture? What we are asking here is: does it matter if a place that is situated in China looks European or American and wants to imitate those lifestyles? Are they then Western? Or do they need white people living in them to be Western?

All the above questions can be asked with different referents. When is Chinese culture Chinese? In Mainland China? What about Hong Kong or Taiwan? Or, if we take the question even further, what about Chinatowns in the West? There, we have had for nearly a hundred years many districts that are called Chinatowns. These so-called Chinatowns are usually populated by Chinese shops, restaurants, and more importantly ethnic Chinese.

It is true that many older Chinese living in foreign countries believe that even though they live in the West – some having done so for generations – they are more knowledgeable about Chinese culture than those back in China. Of course, as Wang Gungwu shows in Chapter 6, there is a great variety of self-identities among the diasporic Chinese communities, and these identities also change over time, sometimes because of the environment in the host country, but more often because of the changing political situation in China itself. In addition, the claim by diasporic communities that they preserve the authentic home culture

while those back in the homeland have lost it is common not just among Chinese, but also among other migrant communities. For example, many young migrant women experience considerable conflict with older generations in their families who complain that the young have lost the moral codes of their home countries. In immigrant countries such as Australia, this migrant syndrome was once quite common among Greeks and Italians, until the older generation realized that their homelands had changed and had left them behind.

The idea of Chinatown has always said more about an imagined Chinese culture of the non-Chinese in the host countries than about the actual cultures in the Chinatowns. For example, Barrio Chino in Barcelona is an area in the inner city that was once the red light district, and was seen to be an area of sex, drugs and crime. They called it Barrio Chino because presumably the Chinese were thought to indulge in sex, drugs and crime. Such an Orientalist use of Chinese culture was also highly evident in Polanski's movie *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. As in Barcelona's Barrio Chino, the Chinese are almost invisible in the movie *Chinatown*: the title only makes sense if we agree that anything associated with even the name Chinese must be imbued with immorality, homicide and inscrutability.

Of course, not all imagined Chinese cultures are evil and corrupt. The Chinatown in the Australian aboriginal township of Cherbourg is also an imagined space, and no Chinese person has ever lived there, but it seems that those who lay claim to it do so because one of the women in generations past might have married a Chinese, and one influential female elder in particular decided that they would define themselves against the other inhabitants by holding on to this Chinese heritage, whether it was real or not. This was one way to counter the oppressive white domination that these communities suffered.[4] It can be argued that this Chinatown has as much to do with Chinese culture as that in Polanski's film *Chinatown*, but can we therefore erase the 'Chinese' qualifier in the term? Obviously, we can only answer in the affirmative if we are perfectly clear what 'Chinese' means and deny all others the right to claim some idea or thing as Chinese. Failing this, 'Chinese' becomes just about anything that we want to make it.

Nonetheless, some of the best minds in China in the last hundred years or so have been trying to devise ways of distilling what they consider to be the essence of 'Chinese culture' so that its good bits can be inherited and its rotten bits discarded. In the early twentieth century, for example,