Contemporary Perspectives on Modernity: A Critical Discussion

Arif DIRLIK
Chinese University of Hong Kong
Contemporary Perspectives on Modernity: A Critical Discussion

Arif DIRLIK
Chinese University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT
This article argues for a revision of our understanding of modernity through an engagement with some recent work in Chinese history. These works (among others) have questioned the identification of modernity with European history. This article argues that while it is necessary to recognize the crucial link between Europe and modernity as phenomenon and concept, it is equally necessary to question the assumption that European modernity itself can be understood without reference to broader global relationships. European modernity, dynamized by capitalism, was one outcome among many of these relationships, which led to different economic and political formations across Eurasia. It suggests a periodization of modernity that retains the strategic role of modern Europe, but also seeks to recognize the complex interactions of which modern Europe itself was a product. European modernity emerged out of what we might describe as a Eurasian modernity, and subsequently asserted its supremacy over other alternatives in globalizing a particular form of modernity. That modernity itself has come under questioning as modernity has been globalized, resulting in what I have described as a third phase, Global Modernity.

Keywords: China, modernity, globalization, history, Eurocentric

The global victory of capitalism has been accompanied by cultural revivals that now serve as the basis for claims to “multiple modernities.” While the term “multiple modernities” is used most commonly to refer to the present and the future, the idea of fundamental diversity in modernity also has raised important questions about the past; namely, that modernity may be viewed as a European product which then spread out from Europe to conquer the world, remaking the world in the image of Europe. Identified with a Eurocentric teleology, this view of modernity’s history is dismissed these days by many taken with the slogan of “provincializing Europe.” And yet, it would be trading one obscurantism for another to deny the transformative part that modern Europe has played in the shaping of modernity, which is quite evident in the global dominance and hegemony of capitalism and its cultural products. This contradiction is my point of departure here.

I would like to offer here some thoughts on the formations of modernity that may enable us if not to resolve the contradiction, then at least to bring some coherence to the problem of modernity as history. I will take Chinese history as my primary referent, partly because I am a little less ignorant about China than I am about other societies, but also because of the important part China has occupied in
historical work that has sought to challenge Eurocentric conceptualizations of history.

Modernity as Historiographical Problem

The proliferation of modernities raises two questions of significance ideologically. First is the resignification of traditions. From a cause of backwardness in an earlier modernization discourse they have turned in a globalized modernity into a source of modern national identity-as well as of “alternative modernities.” This renders meaningless modernization as a motion from the traditional to the modern, which was the fundamental historical teleology that informed modernization discourse in the immediate post-World War II era. There is little need to belabor here the culturalism that informed that teleology. But culturalism has now returned in another guise: in the cultural claims to alternative modernities which similarly insist on cultural persistence, but this time around not in the cause of distinguishing the backward from the advanced, but to vindicate difference, now in an assumption of a common globality.

The globalization of modernity, secondly, has called modernity as a concept into question. There is an irony to the fact that modernity globalized has turned into a site for competing claims on the modern, which calls into question not only the possibility of defining the modern but even of centering it historically in any one location. It may be argued with considerable plausibility that the very claims to the multiplicity of the modern constitute a tacit acknowledgment of the universalist assumptions that have guided modernity all along from its initial fulfillment in Europe. It is further evident that this European modernity that still can claim universality as part of everyone else’s modernity, while competing claims to alternative modernity remain mostly of local interest. The new situation nevertheless calls for a reconsideration of the history of modernity, not just as the assimilation by non-Europeans of a set of practices introduced from the outside, but as the emergence of practices the production of which required the participation of many.

My goal here is not to deconstruct modernity into historical oblivion, because however we might wish to define it, a consciousness of modernity as both material and ideological condition is part of our existence, and has shaped our views of the future and the past. Nor do I see much point in redefining modernity because it seems likely that it is impossible to escape reductionism and ideological closure no matter how we define it. Rather, my goal here is to make some speculative suggestions as to how to go about thinking modernity as a historical problem in light of the contestations that have eroded its coherence. But I do start with a few premises of a contradictory nature. One is that the modernity claimed and created by Euro/America, a colonial modernity, is very much part a condition of

---

1 While modernity needs to be placed in historical perspective, rather than defining that perspective in the first place, historical work has an obligation to address the becoming of the present, unless history is to become just one macro account of the becoming of humanity. There is much to be said for the latter perspective, but it is not inconsistent with other temporalities of varying durations. For a critique of “modernocentrism,” see, Bentley 2006:17-29.
contemporary global existence no matter how much cultural studies scholars might contest and deconstruct it. It does not follow however that this modernity was an autonomous development internal to a “European” history or that, once having become a recognizable historical formation, it acted like a magnet, attracting all societies to its practices. European or Euro/American modernity was one possibility to emerge from the world-wide spread of the political economy of capitalism, and was subsequently forced upon the globe, by force of arms when necessary, powered by the twin dynamos of capitalism and nationalism. Ironically, it is the globalization of these two forces of capitalism and nationalism that now empowers claims to alternative modernities among those who would contest Euro/American domination and hegemony. Unlike in an earlier period, however, the differences they claim are conditioned by participation in the global capitalist economy of which Euro/America still remains the core: they are post-national and post-capitalist, which in many ways also marks them as post-modern and post-colonial. It is useful, I think, if only in the formulation of a coherent problematic, to think of modernity in terms of these three phases, which indicate at once historical periods and modes of distribution of power:

The challenge, therefore, is not to take Europe out of the history of modernity, but rather to reformulate that history in such a way as to grasp modernity both as a product of processes that were ultimately global in scope, and to recognize, for better or worse, the centrality to the formations of modernity of Europe and Europeans. Without worrying about what may or may not be modern, I would like to propose a double understanding of modernity here: modernity understood in terms of relationships, and modernity understood substantively in terms of certain values and practices of everyday life, ranging from politics to everyday social relationships. The former requires us to understand modernity as a global phenomenon both in the forces that went into its making and in its pervasive consequences, which do not presuppose any kind of homogenization but transformative forces transmitted globally through intensified interactions among societies following the Mongol invasions, assuming global scope with the discovery and invasion of the Americas by Europeans. These interactions were themselves both effects and motive forces of structural transformation. The mediating role Europeans came to play in these interactions was one important source of the power they would exert in the formation of modernity. Otherwise modernity understood in terms of relationships is a multi-polar modernity without a center, that took different forms across the width and breadth

2 I will also forego any discussion of the relationship between modernity and modernization. These need to be distinguished in terms of the ways in which they are studied, but they also carry a straightforward relationship that is sufficient for my purposes here, and that has a fundamental status historically: modernization is the process that creates the condition of modernity. The more important distinction, I think, pertains to modernization. Modernization, conceived in path-dependent ways (as it was in modernization discourse) follows a linear path in each nation's history, and automatically creates different modernities. On the other hand, modernization conceived in terms of relationships (including colonialism), calls for a more structured analysis which insists, in addition to difference, on the commonalities and connections that shape the structure. The former approach was characteristic of much modernization discourse, the latter of discourses influenced by Marxism.
of what the historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, called the “Afro-Eurasian ecumene,” and, by the 16th century, across the ocean to the Americas and Australia.3

This understanding of modernity brings into relief what I describe as the substantive understanding of modernity in terms of certain values and practices. These values and practices are particular products of Euro/American modernity, which is what we have understood conventionally by the idea of the modern. That idea was itself invented by Europeans who identified their values and practices as the universal characteristics of modernity-and proceeded to prove it by enslaving and colonizing the world. Through expansion, conquest and colonialism, this particular version of modernity would become globalized from the eighteenth century, erasing other possibilities of modernity that had been produced by some of the same forces that had produced European modernity. It is ahistorical to erase the physical and ideological consequences of the global impact of this European modernity, and neither is it necessary to do so in order to overcome Eurocentrism in history. The discourses of Euro/American modernity are now part of a global discourse of modernity, including, ironically, the legitimation of anti-colonialism and anti-modernism, which find expression in contemporary thinking in postcolonial criticism and postmodernism. If nationalist historiography around the world requires denial of the transformative impact of European modernity, it cannot do so without also denying the coloniality that has been built into the very idea of modernity as it has been understood conventionally. Talk of alternative modernities in our day is not very convincing, as the alternatives assumed are but variations on a theme that is global thanks to the globalization of capitalism, and with it, the values and practices of European modernity. On the other hand, recalling a precolonial period of modernity-where difference was taken for granted-may help place in historical perspective contemporary “variations,” which have their origins not in some vague premodernity but in “traditions” that already had been shaped by the relationships of an emergent global modernity.

Globalization and the Re-writing of Modernity
Most of the contemporary discourse on modernity is conducted under the sign of the global, or takes globalization as a referent. Efforts to render globalization into paradigm for the study of history remain marginal, but they no doubt have received impetus from and contribute to the increasing interest in world history with significant consequences. I have argued elsewhere that world history is not just a subject but also a method, that may be described as “world-historical,” that may be deployed even when the subject at hand is miniscule in spatial and temporal scope. This is quite evident in the respectability-and urgency-“transnational” and “translocal” histories have acquired over the last decade or so.

We need to be cautious, nevertheless, about the novelty, or the consequences of, globalization in our understanding of modernity’s history. A Marshall Hodgson had no need for globalization as concept to write in the mid-1970s that, “Without the

3 For a discussion of Hodgson’s ideas, see, Burke 1979:241-264.
cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, of which the Occident had been an integral part, the Western Transmutation would be almost unthinkable.\footnote{Burke 1979:250.} A previous generation of historians of China from Wolfram Eberhard to Edward Schafer in the United States, Eric Zurcher and Jean Chesneaux in Europe to Chen Yinge and others in China were intensely cognizant of transnational relations in the making of China—the product was unique, no doubt, if subject to immense internal differences; but the method of examining it thoroughly cosmopolitan. It seems almost trite to say, after a generation of world historiography, that modernity was the consequence of and had consequences for global social and political relationships. While modernity has brought in a new awareness of global relationships, it has in the process resulted in the erasure of other possible relationships, which possibly were quite important in the making of modernity, and which need to be re-membered into the construction of a different kind of modernity. It is necessary to specify, therefore, the ways in which a sense of globalization brings along new insights and new perspectives that were foreclosed to those of a cosmopolitan bent who nevertheless still operated within the limits of modernization discourse, with its well-established telologies.

Globalization as paradigm also presents both new challenges and new opportunities. The opportunity lies in the possibility of placing modernization within a long-term historical context that might enable us to overcome the Eurocentric teleology of capitalist development which continues to haunt the supposedly anti-Eurocentric alternatives to it. Globalization as paradigm, in forcing a long-term historical perspective, historicizes modern capitalism itself, rather than making it into the given context of history. Similarly, it may also help overcome the teleology of the nation, not by denying its historical significance (as it is fashionable these days with some historians of China such as Prasenjit Duara),\footnote{Duara 1995.} but enabling analysis to look past the nation. Globalizing modern history offers the possibility of “worlding” Chinese history: bringing Chinese history into the world, and bringing the world into Chinese history. “Worlding” is the opposite of the idea of a “Chinese history from the inside” proposed by Paul Cohen two decades ago.\footnote{Cohen 1984.} It requires that we conceptualize history by thinking outside of the nation, with due attention to issues of transnationality and translocality, which also provide a context for historicizing the nation. From this perspective, “history from the inside” may be read as the last gasp of “Euro/Sino-centrism.”\footnote{I owe this phrase to a former student of mine, Ms. Ana Candela.} Finally, globalization as paradigm calls for close attention to the dialectic between structure and history: the relationship between the multiple forces that have structured the modern world, and how particular societies have both shaped and been shaped by such structurings.

The challenge is to deal with globalization critically. Globalization itself, while it eschews Eurocentrism, nevertheless is continuous with modernization
discourse in the teleology of capitalism that is built into it. It perpetuates both unequal development and unequal power relations, legacies of a colonial modernity, that nevertheless continue to structure the world. In this sense, globalization, or the global modernity it has produced, may be read as the fulfillment of a colonial modernity, most evident in the ideological hegemony of developmentalism, that is a product of modern European capitalism, but also has shaped the socialist response to capitalism. It has been used already in some historical work as an excuse to erase the history of colonialism and, therefore, inequalities of the present that are very much built into contemporary globality. A critical historiography demands that care must be exercised in its deployment as paradigm not to erase but to foreground the shaping of the present by the colonial past.

Without being endowed with the status of a paradigm, globalization already has had some effect on the ways we view Chinese history. During the celebrations of the 600th anniversary of the voyages of Zheng He to the West, the voyages were held up as evidence of globalizing tendencies in Chinese history. Globalization has stimulated renewed interest in world history, with implications for the historiography of China as well. The switch from revolution to modernization as paradigm, ironically, also has encouraged historians to go beyond the nation both in comparative work and in the search for universal causes. Influential advocates of the modernization paradigm, such as Luo Rongqu of Beijing University conceive of modernization not as a substitute for the paradigm of revolution, but as a paradigm that is capable of accounting for the revolution, and much more besides. They also seeks to conceptualize modernization to account for the particular historical circumstances of Chinese society, including the particular ways in which it had to confront modernity, most importantly through the agency of imperialism. Prof. Luo's impressive work of global scope, Xiandaihua xinlun-shijie yu Zhongguode xiandaihua jincheng, is exemplary of the effort to bring together the two paradigms. The book itself is open to criticism for reducing modernization to industrialization, regardless of the relations of production. In the process, it also reinterprets Marxism reductionistically as a theory founded upon the “forces of production.” The synthesis unavoidably appears as a legitimation of the modernizationist socialism of Deng Xiaoping (and, by extension, Zhou Enlai, who is invoked in support of the interpretation offered). But it is an effort at a synthesis that may not be dismissed easily as a substitution of modernization for revolution, especially since his approach to modernization as historical phenomenon resonates with recent developments in Europe and North America. His “monistic multi-linear” is quite reminiscent of the ideas of “multiple” or “alternative” modernities that have acquired popularity in recent years in US scholarship; the major difference being the place he gives to imperialism and colonialism in shaping the developmental trajectories of Chinese and other Third World societies. Prof. Luo's work is continued by his successors at the Center for World Modernization Process at Beijing University.

In a somewhat different vein is the work of so-called “new leftists,” such as Wang Hui. Wang's work pertains mostly to the realm of thought and culture rather than political economy, and is marked by an emphasis on what may best be
described as the anti-modernism provoked by the assault on Chinese society of bourgeois modernization. Anti-modernism itself implies not so much an escape from modernity as the source of an alternative modernity. Nevertheless, his work, as the work of others associated with the New Left, seeks to confront issues raised by contemporary modernization without abandoning certain legacies of the revolution. The confrontation also has raised questions concerning the origins of modernity, and the Eurasian processes that played a crucial part in those origins.

Among US historians of China, there has been an increased attention in recent years to China’s contribution to capitalist development in such works as Andre Gunder Frank’s *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Bin Wong’s *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of the European Experience*, Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, and the collection of writings edited by Giovanni Arrighi, Takeshi Hamashita and Mark Selden, *The Resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 Year Perspectives*. Informed by the rapid economic development of China in recent years, some of this work returns us to Marco Polo’sque visions of China as the center of the world economy, but now viewed from the vantage point of Euro/American societies that have far surpassed what they once envied. So the question almost automatically acquires a teleological orientation: “why did they fall so far behind when once they were so far ahead?” We might remind ourselves that they might not have been headed in our direction at all even when they show many symptoms of modernity. And that the trajectory China follows today is not merely a “resurgence,” but also travel in a new direction as a consequence of China’s entrapment in the capitalist world system. A work such as Frank’s which denies historical capitalism but insists on a 5000-year world system returns into the classical economic assumption of capitalism as the destiny of the world, but taking detours in time through different spaces of the globe. The economistic teleology is also evident in the works of Wong and Pomeranz, especially the latter, in their obliviousness to social and colonial relations in the invention of capitalism, and therefore suppressing significant differences between the societies in question.

In spite of claims to the contrary, much of this work tacitly perpetuates long-standing assumptions of Eurocentrism by universalizing phenomena and categories derived from European developments. It is interesting that discovering capitalist development in China rephrases Chinese Marxist ideas of the “sprouts of capitalism,” which historians in Europe and North America long refused to take seriously because of its universalistic assumptions. It now enjoys a new respectability (along with Confucian capitalism) in the alleged repudiation of Eurocentrism. This is quite misleading, needless to say, as what it does ultimately is to measure change in China according to a standard derived from European modernity. The works I have cited above by Frank, Pomeranz and Wong all suffer from this problem in various ways. Despite their claims to novelty, the idea that China was a match for Europe economically until the middle of the 18th century, and that Europeans operating in Eastern Asia were obliged to follow local practices, is hardly a new one, as it was expressed often enough even by contemporary Europeans themselves. Then Europe jumped ahead for a variety of
reasons, but now China, having absorbed the lessons of the contact, is zooming ahead, and is likely once again to become the new center of the world economy. It is this optimistic appraisal of the present, and its supposed confirmation of a basis for it all in the “premodern” period, that distinguishes these works from earlier studies by Mark Elvin and Philip Huang. The discussion of China’s development has been conducted, and is still conducted, within a paradigm of capitalist modernity, and appears as a consequence as a failed history, a history of absence and lack, rather than as a different history, fraught with different possibilities. This approach, moreover has not been restricted to foreign historians of China. It has been equally true of Marxist historiography for half a century, and is now perpetuated through the new paradigm of modernization that has challenged, and is likely to replace, Marxism in Chinese scholarship. Lost in the process are those alternatives, which call attention not only to the economy but also politics, social and cultural organization and practices. The consideration of these alternative possibilities disappear in the economism of recent literature, which suffers by contrast to its predecessors in its obliviousness to social and political organization in the making of capitalism—and capitalist modernity.

The problem of bringing in Eurocentrism by the backdoor is a problem for all claims to alternative modernities. Claims to alternative modernities seem always to take as their referent Euro/American modernity, and in their very use of the term modern, identified even by its critics with Europe and North America, perpetuate the very Eurocentrism that they would negate. Without a reconceptualization of modernity in general—what I refer to here as different phases of modernity—claims to alternative and multiple modernities are condemned to universalizing the claims of a “singular” modernity even in their assertions of difference. More than anything, the culturalism that pervades these works disguises their assumption of a universality of capitalism, without which European modernity might have remained merely one of a number of competing ethnocentrisms in modernity. Without placing capitalism historically, all such claims to difference are deceptive because the modernity of Europe still provides the point of departure for all such claims.

This is also the case with some other trends that have become visible in recent years. In the general move away from issues of class, and even gender, in recent years, there has been also been a noticeable tendency to search in Chinese history such categories of analysis in Euro/American history as racism, ethnicity, and imperialism, as evidence of participation in globalization. Race and ethnicity, similarly universalize those categories without regard to historical context. Recent works on Qing imperialism, while quite illuminating in their own right, are nevertheless open to criticism for failing to distinguish between the imperialism and colonialism empowered by modern capitalism and imperialism motivated by the political and military needs of world empires (in contrast to “world-systems,” as has distinguished Immanuel Wallerstein). It is also difficult to resist the impression

---

that the recent success of China in global economy and politics has played at least some part in inspiring the new interest in Chinese imperialism in the past, as the new interest also parallels a proliferation of interest in Chinese nationalism.

There has been some resistance to this teleology in works that have stressed difference for what it is, not as some deviation from a proper path but as an alternative response to a proliferating condition of modernity, which had much to do with the constitution of local social and political relations—however we may want to place the local. One such work is Sucheta Mazumdar's, *Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology, and the World Market*. Influenced by the writings of Indian critics of modernity and development, such as the distinguished scholar Rajni Kothari, this work also affirms the possibility of alternative modernities prior to their conquest by capitalism in one form or another. The possibilities of difference in modernity are recognized also in Benjamin Elman's study of science in late imperial China and Alexander Woodside's study of public administration and the examination system in Eastern Asian societies in his *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea and the Hazards of World History*. Elman's study is also exemplary of the collaboration of Europeans and Chinese in the production of modernity—albeit with the intermediation of European intellectuals. Another work that is worthy of attention for its sensitivity to difference in modernity, at a more general cultural level, is Roxann Prazniak, *Dialogues Across Civilizations: Sketches in World History from the Chinese and European Experiences*.

A word of caution is in order here as well. Some scholars (including Elman) have described this period of collaboration as “early modern,” distinguishing it from the modern that was to follow with Euro/American domination. But the distinction also disguises a teleology. The term “early modern” makes sense within the context of European history written as a narrative of modernity: as a prelude to modernity the promises of which were fulfilled in subsequent centuries—even if the transition may be in disputation. The period described by the term, therefore, is not merely “chronological,” referring to a certain stretch of time (say, c.1450-c.1750). It also is “pregnant” (to use Marx’s metaphor for social formations) with characteristics that are to give birth to modernity. Any application of the term to other histories introduces this teleology as well, underlining once again the failure of those characteristics to sprout in China. If, on the other hand, the emphasis is on commonalities among societies during this time period, then Europe’s “early modernity” may be called into question. For we must then inquire why it was only in Europe that capitalism emerged, and whether or not the global entanglements of Europeans had anything to do with the emergence of capitalism—and the capitalist
modernity which provided the legitimation for Euro/American claims to the monopoly. Other possibilities that emerged during this period in responses to the forces of increased global interactions in the end proved to be no match for the power of capital to extend itself globally, through the colonization of the world. Rather than being preludes to a modernity, these “alternative” responses to the condition of modernity point in hindsight to alternative futures as well. These alternatives, for whatever they may be worth, were to be suppressed by a Euro/American modernity empowered by nationalism and capitalism. In order to avoid teleology, the two periods taken as the “modern” and the “premodern” are better viewed, as contradictory rather than as evolutionary phases in the history of modernity. Eurow/American modernity was built not only on the conquest of others, but also the conquest of its own past. We need to recover what Alexander Woodside has described as “lost modernities,” not for reactionary purposes of restoration or revival, but as resources to help out in the resolution of problems of modernity that have become critical. That means a prior recognition, however, that what is being recovered is not something “early modern,” or “premodern” or traditional, but an alternative within modernity in its initial phase. It is in this phase that it is possible to speak of “alternatives,” rather than the present, when claims to alternative modernities are nevertheless deeply compromised through entanglement in capitalist modernity. If Europe is to be “provincialized,” it is in this early phase of modernity, when European modernity was one modern among others, rather than the present when the capitalist modernity, globalized, provides the grounds for modernity globally.

It is for similar reasons, I may note here, that it makes more sense presently to speak of a “global modernity,” than, say, late modernity. The present is not just a development out of an earlier phase of modernity—“Eurocentric modernity”—but also seeks negation of the latter in its insistence on multiple and alternative modernities. In the process, however, it also disguises its own grounds in the very modernity it rejects: capitalist modernity which is now globalized, and transforms societies in fundamental ways. The two century domination of the globe by a Eurocentric modernity may be over, and once again we face the prospect of a polymorphous modernity. But this polymorphous modernity is nevertheless marked indelibly by the experience of the last two centuries. Nowhere is this more clearly evident in the religious revivals that seek to negate fundamental aspects of what has been viewed as modernity, and do so by utilizing the most advanced practical and ideological technologies provided by a global capitalism of which they are beneficiaries.

Modernity, Capitalism, Modernization and Revolution
When does modernity begin in China? The dominant approach to the question has been to begin modernity with the political and military encounter of the 19th

10 For a recent discussion involving historians of Europe, Western Asia, India and China (Ben Elman), see the recent round-table on the idea of the “premodern,” IIAS 2007:5-12.
century, which also initiates imperialism, nationalism, resistance, cultural transformation, and revolution. This is the periodization that is taken for granted by both paradigms under discussion, both in China and the US.

If modernity has anything to do with capitalism, I would like to suggest here, the discussion of modernity needs to inquire further into the relationship between the emergence of capitalism, the restructuring of the world, and the place in it of China. I mean place in both a temporal and a spatial sense: the place of China in the emergence of capitalism, and the place of China in Eurasia, which is the irreducible spatial context for the emergence of capitalist modernity.

The account of the emergence of capitalism that is most satisfactory does indeed work within these spatial and temporal parameters: the emergence of a single capitalist world-system out of a multiplicity of world-systems across Eurasia, which would ultimately center on Europe from the 18th century, by which time the whole globe was brought within the purview of this world-system. While there had been interactions across Afro-Eurasia since the beginnings of humankind, it is fair to observe, I think, that it was the Mongol invasions that invented Eurasia as we know it, and it is from the Mongol invasions that it is possible to date the emergence of Europe and China as we have known them in the modern period.

Translocal interactions across Eurasia nevertheless produced different formations within a new Eurasian world-system. The emergence of capitalism in Western Europe was a product of these interactions within the context of European society. It would seem that everywhere across the width of Afro-Eurasia, and across oceans to the “new” lands, there was an intensification of activities of exchange, and appearance in increasing numbers of independent “entrepreneurs”-as landlords, merchants and laborers. The consequences were different in different parts of Asia, depending on local circumstances. Europe was to produce capitalism, and a modernity founded upon it, which would rapidly result in European and American domination of the world.

In Eastern Asia, the same period witnessed the consolidation of empire-and the formation of “China” as we have known it with the Ming and the Qing. Initial openness of the early Ming, as witnessed by the Zheng He expeditions was followed by greater control over the borders in response to the intensification of pressure from the outside both on the coast and the interior.

This “closing out” of the world, however, did not stop significant interactions across the Eastern Asian world-system, including cultural interactions as well. Interestingly, given the importance of Central Asian interactions in the formation of East Asia, the Ming and the Qing evinced more interest in this area (Mongols, Russians and other groups in Central Asia) than in the strangers that showed up with increasing frequency and insistence on the coast. Already, however, the effects

---

11 I am referring here to the seminal work of Janet Abu-Lughod, 1991. A full development of this approach may be found in Fernand Braudel, 1992. In the work cited above, Wigen suggests a “world network analysis” as a substitute for “world system analysis.” Networks were no doubt crucial during this period. But they help refine world system analysis, rather than serve as a substitute for it. Its substitution for world system analysis serves no purpose other than disguise inequalities in the making of modernity.
of an emergent capitalist world-system were evident in the “sprouts of capitalism” that Chinese Marxist historians observed in the Late Ming. The arrival of Europeans on the China coast led to further defensive closure, especially as European activities turned from assimilation into an Eastern Asian sphere to transforming it in accordance with needs and demands emanating from Europe. By this time, the emergent world-system was not just Eurasian but, through the Philippines, included the Americas as well. Ming-Qing efforts to control the borders, however, prevented neither the inflow of commodities, nor the emigration to Southeast Asia and beyond of Chinese populations, which also dates back to this period. The transformations wrought by the emergent capitalist world-system no doubt provides a context for the simultaneous expansion of Europe and China, although it is important to be attentive to differences as well: the two expansions may both be products of an emerging global world-system, but one was empowered by capitalism, the other one a defensive expansion which, at the very least, was not transformative in its consequences at any scale comparable to the effects of an imperialism empowered by capitalism.

These long-term developments provide an indispensable context, I think, for understanding 18th-19th century encounters. From the late 18th century, European imperialism empowered by the industrial revolution was able to force the Qing to open to the world-system. By the end of the 19th century, the Eastern Asian world-system had been incorporated into a global world-system, bringing to completion a process that had been under way at least for four centuries. In this perspective, modernization and revolution appear as part of the same process, representing internal social differences and conflicts that had their local peculiarities but may be impossible to explain without reference to Ming-Qing incorporation into the capitalist world-system. Similarly, nation-building may be viewed as part of an effort to contain and regulate these new forces as well as to ward off imperialism (we need to remember that nationalism was universalized as political form as part of the European expansion, and as one of its consequences). The socialist revolution was legitimizes by a promise that socialism could achieve the goal of national integration which the bourgeoisie could not accomplish under conditions of dependent development. But it was motivated also by a desire to find an alternative path of development that could escape from and transcend the capitalist world-system. Socialism is not to be reduced to nationalism. If it was nationalistic, it was a different kind of nationalism that it proposed, one that had cosmopolitanism as an integral part.

Having achieved autonomy through the revolution, China presently has given up on finding an alternative to the modern world-system, but instead seeks for alternatives within it, which is articulated through the paradigm of modernization, now in the guise of “multiple modernities”. Success within the capitalist world-system, however also exacts a price in the resignation to the fundamental assumptions of capitalism, most prominently developmentalism. It also calls into the question the idea of China, as parts of the country are integrated fully into a capitalist world system while other parts are left behind, or marginalized. This is the ideological pitfall not only for modernization as paradigm, but for the paradigm of
an instrumentalized socialist revolution as well. Revolution is remembered presently mostly for its contribution to development. Utopianism and idealism have been abandoned. But it is important to remember what they expressed: not just a naïve longing for a perfect existence, but also for an alternative to the world system dynamized by capitalism. It is no surprise that the emergence of modern utopianism accompanied the emergence of a capitalist modernity.

Concluding Observations
If the above account sounds like containing the history of modern China in a grand narrative of capitalism, that is only partially true. The narrative I am suggesting is one that begins with the formation of capitalism out of many Eurasian interactions, in which Chinese history played a formative part. It is only with the emergent hegemony of capitalist modernity, apparent from the 18th century, that Chinese history flows into the metanarrative of capitalism, as one of its localized narratives. If this seems like degrading Chinese history, it is worth underlining that European history, too, is localized in this metanarrative; as one of the spatial formations in globalization of capital, albeit with a hegemonic part to play in the emergence of modernity.

The problem in this expanded paradigm of modernity is how to reconcile structure and history, or the grand narrative and the local narratives. The question of paradigms we face presently goes beyond the problem of a paradigm crisis. Global Modernity, in its premise of a multiplicity of modernities, also sets different histories against one another, in many ways promising to put an end to history—at least history with some coherence. Its attack on the nation as the location for historical narratives also challenges the modern conceptualization of history, which from the beginning was entangled in nationalism.

Globalization in historical work may represent an effort to restore coherence to this situation through a new metanarrative. It may produce a new history, depending on the outcome, or it may mean the end of history. To complicate matters, there is a keen awareness presently that we are not at the end of history, and hence do not have the comprehensive outlook on the past that might be necessary to claims to historical truth. The repudiation of teleologies, or the claim to multiple teleologies linking different pasts and presents, has also deprived the future of any kind of coherence that might permit convincing adjudication of competing interpretations. The crisis now is not just a paradigm crisis, but a crisis of history itself. The past, as postmodernists might say, is up for grabs.

But the crisis may also provide an opportunity, an opportunity that has been created by the retreat of historical determinisms of various kinds, foregrounding the importance of humans making their own history; not arbitrarily, as Marx pointed out, but still making it under given conditions. The paradigm I have suggested above may be helpful in this regard. While it centers capitalism as the structuring force of modernity, it rejects centering the structure around any particular history, drawing attention to the multiplicity of histories that went into the making of modernity and the multiplicity of histories that are on the
emergence from its ruins. It may be possible in this perspective to once again bring into visibility not only the variety of phenomena produced by modernity, but also the many histories that were erased under the regime of modernity, that may now be brought into play in challenging the hegemony of a colonial modernity. The challenge may also be crucial to human survival, and the crises that have attended the globalization of capitalist modernity. The challenge to the hegemonic teleology of capitalist modernity needs to undertake, most immediately, a challenge to the developmentalism that has driven this teleology.

ABBREVIATIONS

IIAS       International Institute for Asian Studies-Leiden

GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chen Yinge</td>
<td>陳寅恪</td>
<td>Qing</td>
<td>清</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deng Xiaoping</td>
<td>鄧小平</td>
<td>Takeshi Hamashita</td>
<td>滅下武志</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duoxiande</td>
<td>多線的</td>
<td>Wang Hui</td>
<td>汪暉</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luo Rongqu</td>
<td>羅榮渠</td>
<td>yiyuan duoxian</td>
<td>一元多線</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>明</td>
<td>Zheng He</td>
<td>鄭和</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming-Qing</td>
<td>明清</td>
<td>Zhou Enlai</td>
<td>周恩來</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REFERENCES

Burke, Edmund. III, 1979. “Islamic History as World History”. In International
Journal of Middle East Studies, 10(2). pp.241-264.


