Can a Post-1919 World History be Written?

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ABSTRACT
This paper takes up the question of post-1919 “world history” and disarticulates that concept from a Chinese perspective of semi-colonialism, journalism, and May Fourth social formations. It begins and concludes with the assertion that world history is not a proper category of inquiry or analysis, but rather, how a global temporal moment—such as 1919—can be constituted and understood through a global systemic logic of the accretion of its parts. The focus on May Fourth and semi-colonialism speaks to this issue.

Keywords: Modern China, semi-colonialism, journalism, world history, 1919

Introduction
As a form of pre-emption, I want to commence by answering the question in my title—can a post-1919 world history be written? -with a strong “no.” Such a history cannot be written, nor should it. Many histories of 1919—as a globalized series of problematics—can be written; I intend to indicate below what I believe such a history might include if it focused on China. And yet, this would be neither a national history, nor what some might call a biography of the year, 1919, from a “Chinese” perspective. Indeed, both of those historiographical configurations presume an historical construction before its materialization in history. Thus, this history of China in 1919, or of China and 1919 would have to be attentive to the dialectics of the global and the local moments, of how they constitute one another to turn “1919” and “China” into mutually informative topoi of historical analysis. In this sense, these cannot be treated as preconstituted objects of inquiry, otherwise the historicity of each is impoverished and indeed overwritten. Thus, while the fact of a simultaneity of events—May Fourth, 1919 (in China)/March First 1919 (in Korea)—must be acknowledged, we have to go further by asking why? What is the conjuncture that might bring these events into a common focus? This short provocation in the form of a conference paper is an attempt to think about that problem.

Semi-colonialism and everyday imperialism
I begin with a general proposition on semi-colonialism as a problem of the lived social and everyday experience of imperialism in China in the post-Versailles Treaty period. As is well-known, narratively this timeframe corresponds in Chinese history to the “May Fourth” period, whose major event of reference is the eruption on
May 4, 1919 of a widescale urban protest movement against frustrated aspirations confirmed at the Versailles Treaty Conference, where German territories, rather than be returned to Chinese sovereignty were instead handed over to Japan. The subsequent urban protest, which soon moved from its epicenter of Beijing to encompass the entire country to become a modern political and social movement, gave impetus to the ongoing radical rethinkings of the premises of the Chinese nation—as a people and a culture—and the relationship of the Chinese state to that nation, as well as to the post-Great War world more generally. In this sense, “May Fourth” can be said to have been of major importance to the elaboration of what henceforth was to be considered “modern” in Chinese history, not only culturally and intellectually, but also with regard to the movement of politics into the urban masses and beyond. It was also crucial to redefining the modern in terms of state-form and its relation to politics. As it turned out, this took shape in two ways: in relation to the formation of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 and its partnering of mass politics to socio-economic revolution, as well as to the establishment after 1927 of a fascist polity under the direction of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Party and its attempt to capture and reconfigure mass politics for distinctly counter-revolutionary cultural and political purposes.

What I intend to discuss below, however, is not the macro-level formations or institutional outcomes of the May Fourth period. And nor do I wish to engage the question of whether or not May Fourth is too central to our conceptions of modernity in China. For my purposes here and whatever its many antecedents in the late-Qing (late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century), the May Fourth Movement presented a systemic and systematic attempt to critique and rethink the premises of “China”: for this reason, its centrality is not in doubt, even if its ruptural implications are somewhat attenuated. Rather than these dead-end debates about origins, what interests here me is that Chinese commentators across the complex ideological spectrum from the 1920s onwards came to understand the simultaneity of their lived experiences of the local and the global in China—of what has been called by Tani Barlow and others, colonial modernity—as an experience named “semicolonialism”.

1 A first version of this paper was originally prepared for a conference at Duke University, “Imperialist Order Transformed? Global Perspectives on the Legacies of World War I,” 2-4 Mar. 2007; it was significantly revised and expanded for the international conference at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, 13-14 Feb. 2009. I thank the Korean conference organizers, particularly Prof. Min Byounghee, for inviting me to participate and the conference attendees, particularly Prof. Lim Jie-hyun, for insightful comments and lively discussion.

2 For a general account of the May Fourth Movement and its intellectual sources, see Chow Tse-tsun 1960; for a re-interpretation of May Fourth in terms of its revolutionary and political implications, see Arif Dirlik 1989. There is a vast English- and Chinese-language literature on May Fourth, including the more recent attempts in the past decade or so to decenter the event as the origins of modernity in China.

3 As Barlow has explained, “colonial modernity” was coined by her in the 1990s, as a way to redress the problem posed by China's modern history in the global history of colonialism. Since most China scholars at the time did not recognize China's encounter with colonialism as a major aspect of its modern history, Barlow proposed “colonial modernity” as a way to include China into the history of global colonialism. In this sense, as she put it, “colonial modernity” made modern China's colonially reconfigured spaces visible, see Barlow 2009.
Here, I do not consider “semincolonialism” in its more accustomed guises—for China studies, at least—as either an incomplete political-social formation (incomplete because China was never fully colonized or completely subsumed into capitalist production relations); or semi-colonialism as a hybrid form of cultural modernity that both accepted and rejected something called Western modernism or Western modernity, thus constituting an alternative modernity. Instead, what I wish to focus on is the turn in the 1920s to an intense and even overriding concern with the everyday as a disjunct temporality of social life, thus as the very daily experience of unevenness that, as Henri Lefebvre noted in a different context, is precisely what “exposes the possibilities of conflict between the rational and irrational [...] thus permitting the formulation of concrete problems of production (in the widest sense): how the social existence of human beings is produced [...]”

This approach to the semicolonial—as everyday social experience of uneven temporality, or as the conditions or the mode through which social existence is produced at a particular time and place—allows me to consider, while also bypassing, the altogether dead-end debates—in China studies today as well as amongst Chinese at the time-over whether China was actually modern or not in the 1920s; over what the specific content of a so-called Chinese modernity might look like; and over what the apparent monolith called “Western modernity” might be, against which a Chinese version could be counterposed. That is, on my view, a focus on semicolonialism as a socially lived experience of temporal disjuncture points exactly to modernity as a tendentially universal category of and in capitalism, that is, however, never reducible to capitalism’s universalist claims or aspirations. Indeed, as Harry Harootunian has cogently put it, peoples in the non-Euro-American world in particular have, since the nineteenth century at least, “been forced to live lives comparatively by virtue of experiencing some form of colonization.” This comparative experience, he goes on to note, is what 1930s Japanese theorist Watsuji Tetsuro called the formation of a “double life.” It is this experience of the doubling of life, I suggest, that goes by the name of semicolonialism in the 1920s in Chinese commentary. It is in this sense that I wish to focus on the term. For, it is not my purpose to restore this category—“the semicolonial”—to the historical lexicon, in part because it has proven to be particularly susceptible in these postcolonial globalized times to a fierce cultural and political exceptionalism. In part, it is because the semicolonial is already named as such: it is the colonial, as experienced locally. However, I do think it necessary to understand the semicolonial, not to rehabilitate it but finally to put it to rest. From this perspective, semicolonialism was never and cannot be thought as a Chinese exception or alternative; it is the imperialist rule as that rule was lived in China in the post-1919 world. It also cannot be thought as a uniquely Chinese experience of or a uniquely Chinese cultural response to modernity, even though of course life in

4 The first version—semi-colonialism as incompletion—is the more accustomed talismanic invocation in Chinese Communist pronouncements; for an analysis, see Karl 2005:169-200. The second is a more recent positive spin on the “semi” part of semi-colonialism, for which see Shu-mei Shih 2001.

5 Lefebvre 1999:23.

China was experienced by Chinese and culturally formulated in ways unique to China’s history and cultural specificities.

If semicolonialism is not about exceptionalism and uniqueness, then one question becomes: why in the post-Versailles Treaty period Chinese increasingly called this experiential rule “semicolonial” and what they signified thereby. I could answer that historical question with a genealogy of the term “semicolonialism”, as it derives from Lenin and as it seeped into and soon saturated the lexicon of Chinese socio-political analysis in formal Communist Party commentaries, in Maoist speech and analysis, as well as in less formalized general public commentary. However, I have done that genealogical work elsewhere. Here, I wish to present a different sort of proposition for consideration. Briefly stated, I propose that semicolonialism be understood as a problem of the socially lived experience of everyday life as this understanding was inextricably linked—chronologically, conjuncturally, and ontologically—to post-1919 journalism and print media, themselves understood not merely as a medium of transmission and transparent communication, but instead, as a commodity form, or, then, as a particular form that is philosophically tied to producing a temporality of the present, or a co-presence.

Journalism, Everyday, and Semi-colonialism

In the past decade or so, many historians of modern China—as of modern Korea and Japan, among others—have rushed towards the study of print media, print culture, and journalism. Some use their examinations as evidence for an argument about the existence in 1920s China of a quasi-Habermasian proto-public sphere; others, to the contrary, use similar evidence to argue for the lack of such a public sphere. Yet others build an argument for the specific cultural-linguistic forms taken by the modern Chinese print media that could bespeak an alternative modernity of a hybrid form; and yet another type of argument revolves around the technological advancements in print media that could speak to China’s early technological modernizationist convergence with the advanced capitalist world. There are those who write histories of journalism that concentrate on individual careers and/or the rise and fall of various journals, and those who focus on the proliferation of gendered advertising, graphic arts, or women’s journals as a specific form of gendered subjectivity in 1920s and 1930s urban China, particularly in Shanghai. One major recent trend is to link sensationalist journalism to what is now called the “emotional” public sphere, or to the construction of non-rational publics, with the emphasis on the plurality and femininity of publics, which can shift and be shifted according to the latest trends. Despite the contradictory claims made by some of these studies, most do note a long history to the print phenomenon in China and try to place the modern print media into this longer chronology, sometimes as a continuity from something older, sometimes as a ruptural break into something newer. One position

7 Karl 2005.

8 There is far too much historiography on this question to cite here. However, the newest version—the “emotional” public—has had its most complete exposition in Eugenia Lean 2007. Along the way to arguing her reconfiguration, Lean does an effective review of the extant literature in her Introduction.
gaining particular popularity these days in the China field is that which denies anything new in the modern print media, since moveable type had long existed in China along with a thriving commercial publishing culture and thus a quasi-mass audience, all of which predated the arrival of modern-style media; this older print culture, it is said, could be considered an equivalence to and thus anticipation of the modern print media. It could, in fact, be considered the determinative criterion for a Chinese modernity *avant la lettre*.

As is clear from this very brief historiographical sketch, all sorts of things are claimed on behalf of or despite the growth of print media in China in the 1920s. Even those who want to argue for something rupturally modern about it do not agree what defines its modernity: whether its modernity resides in its newness, or in its hybridity; in its technological adaptation, or in its social effectivity and political role; in its legitimization of emotions, or in its insistence on rationality; among other possibilities. I mention all this not because I have any interest in adjudicating amongst these claims. Quite to the contrary: it seems that the claims, as they are now articulated in the historiographical literature, as well as the historical questions that guide the research, lead to an essential theoretical and conceptual impasse. This impasse consists, in part, in construing the print media and journalistic phenomena as merely functional to something else, a position that can never yield anything but a technocratic version of modernity/modernization/modernism, whose evaluated social significance is then entirely dependent upon implicitly or explicitly ideologically-conceived checklists derived from a central standard, generally named "the West". It also conceives journalism/print media as a technology that is somehow autonomous from the social relations in which it is embedded. In my view, neither of these positions can yield new insights. Indeed, it seems clear to me that one must reconfigure the whole set of historical questions in order to see some other theoretical, conceptual, and historical possibilities.

Towards that end, what does become interesting upon a consideration of journalism in China in the post-Versailles moment, is how thoroughly "mass culture" comes to be associated with the elaboration and reproducibility of everyday life as a modern journalistic event and as a temporality of the present. That is, on the one hand, there were certainly plenty of scandals–political scandals, famous people scandals, sex scandals, suicide scandals, etc.–that filled newspapers and journals prior to the 1920s in China; there was also a relatively well elaborated sense of the event[shijian]–or at least the case[anjian]–as an occasion for journalistic attention and media exposure, even if the majority of these events were deemed eventful only if they happened to the rich and powerful, or to and within the fragmenting state. The suggestion here, then, is not that somehow the superficial relationship between events and journalism was transformed after 1919; it was not transformed, although it was intensified. Nor is the suggestion that the only interesting thing about post-1919 journalism is the expansion of journalistic subjects down the social ladder; important as that sociological fact is, it is at best symptomatic.

9 For an early critique of this kind of perspective on technology, see Williams 1989:119-140.
10 For my attempt to rethink the problem of print media, see Karl 2008a.
What I do wish to suggest is that the relationship between events and journalism came to signify quite differently in the 1920s. That is, on the one hand, events, having been understood as aberrations from the everyday, came to be embedded in the everyday. In this sense, it appears to me that it is only in the wake of the crisis that had resulted in the Great War, and in the wake of the cultural and social interiorization of that crisis by Chinese intellectuals in the post-War decades, that everyday life could be produced as a potential unity of social experience in the massification of culture and life through journalism and print media. This potential unity was dependent upon the extension of the “event” as a shared experience of everyday life itself. In this light, we must see the legacy of the Great War as a continuing displaced crisis in global capitalism, that was not only economic and political, but deeply social and cultural as well. This displaced crisis often appears in Chinese historical commentary as purely cultural—in the guise of the May Fourth rejection of Confucian ritual[ijiao], for example; or, as purely political—as with the United Front aspirations for a unified and centralized state; or yet, as purely commercial—as with the proliferation of consumer-driven advertising and marketization.

On the other hand, the potential unity announced by the production of everyday life as massified culture can be seen through journalism and print media not only as an expansive technological medium but more importantly, as a social form of the production of a synchronic temporal present along a bumpy local-global continuum that produces the event as life itself. That is, rather than eventfulness being an aberration from the quotidiem, the event is embedded in the quotidiem as an occasion for journalistic commentary and critique. In the combination—the post-Great War displacements of capitalist crisis and journalism as a mode of the production of a co-present temporality in the everyday—we can begin to see the contours of how a massification of everyday life begins to saturate and define the field of the social itself. Here, mass culture in the form of journalism and print media rendered visible the everyday as the collective social mode in which Chinese lived the cotemporality of their past and present, the urban and rural, China and the global, and so on. At the same time as it made visible this temporal and spatial cotemporality, it also thus rendered unavoidable the uneveness within China and between China and other parts of the world. Nevertheless, it also made possible the calling into being of “the masses” as the subject of historical becoming, as the subjects of a potentially new socio-politics rather than merely as historically subjected beings. This becomes the possibility for the massification of politics and the politics of the masses, all of which see an exponential growth through the 1920s/30s.

In one sense, this massification presented a utopian potential that held out the possibility that everyday life could, in Lefebvre's phrase, be a “subject’ rich in potential subjectivity,” rather than an “object’ of social organization.” Indeed, this was a political potential that flashed up in China, from time to time, from the

11 Lefebvre 1984:59.
1920s all the way through the 1940s and even for a brief time after the 1949 Communist revolution in the mainland. This political potential was, however, always overwhelmed by the overdetermined outcome of the capitalist production of unevenness, globally and locally, and by the revolutionary pressures in China for a different form of politics altogether. As such, 1919 can be seen to be a prelude to and yielding up both communism and fascism, as competing and commensurate, although certainly not conflatable, desires to massify everyday life. That is, what communism and fascism had in common was the thorough massification and politicization of the everyday, even while the historical goals and political valences of each were obviously entirely different (despite a post-Cold-War ideological tendency to utterly conflate them). The point, however, is to note that both communism and fascism as potential state-forms and tendentially totalizing ideologies were equally and cotemporally historical legacies of the Great War, responses to the crises that gave rise to that war and that resulted from it. This is not a new observation for European studies, perhaps; yet, in China studies, the fascism of the Nationalist Party after 1927 is rarely understood as a product of the political and cultural crisis in and of liberalism announced by and through 1919 (for example, the failure of Wilsonianism). As such, in China as in many other places, the transformation of the imperialist order after the Great War can be seen in part as the the state institutionalization of the crisis in capitalism in two forms: communist and liberal/fascist. The structural uniqueness of the Chinese case is the long co-existence—from the 1920s through 1949—in the same territorial space of both state-forms as viable and competing polities.

At the sub-institutional level, after 1919, the everyday as a form of political totalization came under the pressure of both right-wing and left-wing revolutionary movements, both of which precisely turned on massification but nevertheless also served to overwrite the quotidian in favor of different kinds of totalizations altogether. For the Nationalists, the quotidian was over-written by the reasons of state; for the Communists, by the exigencies of revolutionary unity and progress. By the same token, in the interstices, the everyday came to be pathologized and soon objectified by social scientificity, through which “social problems” [shehui wenti] were diagnosed and slated for amelioration and/or management. Simultaneously, the everyday also came to be subjected to intensified marketization that turned it into an occasion for thoroughgoing consumerist commodification. It is the latter of these transformations that has seized the attention of most historians. Yet, what remains undertheorized in the simple historical version of commodification=massification is precisely what social/cultural relationship was being established—in temporal terms no less than in epistemological ones—between the everyday and the event.

Extending Lefebvre’s analysis here, we can see the expansion of print media and journalism—commodified and as commodity form in the strictly Marxist sense—as the process of the “generalization of private life.” While from his 1950s French vantage, Lefebvre saw this process as inevitably destructuring in a corrosive sense—

12 Lefebvre 2002:77.
that is, as a form of "privation"—however, from the vantage of 1920s China, one could see that this generalization of private life helped produce a sense of social being, where no such sense had existed in anything like a tendentially unified form. This sense of social being was potentially revolutionary, albeit not in the organized Party sense of that term. It was through the eventful repetitiveness and the repetition of eventfulness in and of the everyday, produced as a cotemporal present in journalism and media, that revolutionary potential was endowed with its initial impetus and significance. Clearly never unmarked by the commodity form as a form of the reproducibility of social value, and nor untouched by commodification in its simpler market sense of exchange value, these forms of repetition, nevertheless, allowed for the interpenetration of the event with the everyday. This interpenetration did not merely produce some sort of social identification, even though most historical analyses do stop at this reflective level of analysis (that is, the passions and social emotions stirred up by certain events are said to have produced gendered sociality, or a bourgeois identification, or whatever). Rather, this interpenetration produced the possibility of thinking and acting upon and in the social as a totality. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the problem of "the social" arises in intense articulated fashion so very forcefully at precisely this moment of the post-1919 period, not only in China, of course, but globally.

It is here, then, that the semicolonial becomes not merely a descriptive of a modern incompleteness or of a uniquely Chinese hybrid cultural form; rather, the semicolonial can be seen as a Chinese attempt to analyze an historical form of experience as a grounds of global and local comparability at a specific moment in time. This form of comparable experience precisely marks the interpenetration of the durational "event" of imperialism with the punctuated existences lived as the everyday life of the Chinese masses in an uneven cotemporality produced as a massification of the present. In this sense, if we take the transformations in capitalism and thus in imperialism as immanent and incessant, we can avoid the displacement of the crisis represented by the Great War and its aftermath unto an institutional incompletion or cultural uniqueness. We can also avoid the re-centering of world history upon a determinate moment, whose knowability is discernible before it is constituted as such.13 In so doing, we recognize that the double life of being Chinese in the 1920s is an historical experience that stands at the heart of the imperialist order even while the imperialist order stands at the heart of being Chinese. This was given specific articulated form, through the 1920s and 1930s in China, in the multiple debates over social formation, historicism, agrarian economics, social history, and so on. In and through these multiple debates—all of which took place in the pages of journals and in part depended upon precisely the production of a cotemporal present through the massification of life in the print media—the unevenness within China, as well as between China and the rest of the world became the subject and object of endless theorization, in economic, political, social, and cultural terms. All of this to one extent or the next went under the rubric of "semicolonialism", soon

13 For my critique of this approach, see my review of Erez Manela's The Wilsonian Moment.
linked to its twin, “semifeudalism” in the Comintern and Chinese Communist Party designation of the current stage of Chinese development in the historicist sense. Yet, prior to its 1930s dogmatization as an historicist stage to be overcome through Communist Revolution, semicolonialism became one flawed but extremely popular mode of acknowledging and naming the form of living the doubled life of an imperialized present in China in the 1920s.

**Conclusion**

For all its susceptibility in the 1920s/30s to historicism and/or interpretations of “incompletion”, and for all its contemporary susceptibility in these globalized postcolonial times to cultural and political exceptionalization—and thus in all of its inadequacy as an appropriate or adequate analytic—the semicolonial can be recognized as a particular signifier of the post-Great War transformations in the imperialist order, as understood, incorporated, named, and experienced in China in the 1920s. Journalism in this analysis is not the mere epiphenomenal technological medium through which this commentary and naming takes shape, but rather it is the crucial social form through which the uneven cotemporal present was produced and massified. It is, thus, this conjunctural combination that I would designate as one of the most potent legacies of the Great War as well as one of the most intriguing transformations in the imperialist order in China after 1919.

Thus, to end where I began: there is no one “world history” of 1919. There are histories that help constitute 1919 as a global historical problematic and historical moment, not because 1919 marks an entirely ruptural temporal order but because the social forms of local and global life were set along an utterly different path at this time. That was a path that was unavoidably lived comparatively and that was, in that sense, unavoidably global.

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**GLOSSARY**

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