China and Globalization

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Mirroring a development within historiography in general, China scholars have started to relate their own area of expertise to a larger, a global perspective. Certainly there are different interpretations about the contents and the usefulness of the term “globalization”, but after all there are reasons for why the concept or its disciplinary adaptation, “Global History”, has quickly risen to prominence in recent years. Firstly, unlike the heavily laden word “world”, “globe” does not smack of Western-centrism. Secondly, “global” expresses a certain multi-layered connectedness of all historical realms – it entails relations, flows, and influences at a cultural, social, political, and of course an economic level. Thirdly, in contrast to key words such as “international”, “trans-national”, or “trans-cultural” “global” does not presuppose the nation state or certain distinctive cultures as key units of scholarly inquiry. Fourthly, the term “global” expresses a certain level of consciousness, a distinct time-bound experience-base of the historian living in an age that has been stereotyped as a shrinking world of ever tightening interconnections. This is not to say that we are entering an epoch of a standardized, uniform global village – quite to the contrary, cultural, political and other differences will continue to persist. Yet fundamental “otherness” can no longer be expected.

As a consequence, it is necessary for scholars to find ways with which to fruitfully combine the specific conditions of the Chinese experience with a larger view of regional, macro-regional and even global settings. In sociology similar intellectual endeavors have been pursued under the agenda of “glo-localization” or “Multiple Modernities”. It is my belief that the recently emerging field of Global History should continue to explore the interrelationship between global structures, conditions, and processes in addition to the local contexts (such as the
Chinese world) within which they are embedded. Such a perspective should seek to avoid a
totalizing understanding of the various waves and dimensions of globalization while being
equally cautious not to essentialize China just like any other nation state or cultural tradition. Just
as there is no one uniform set of processes of globalization, China is certainly too big and too
diverse to treat it as one entity interacting with the world beyond. Even though China arguably
achieved a historically unique degree of standardization and centralization during the course of
the 20th century, its regions and social groups were not affected by globalization in the same
manner.

In the following I will trace back the evolution of scholarly efforts to relate the Chinese
experience to a wider, trans-cultural or even global arena. As I will show there are now growing
efforts to get beyond a culturally autistic vision of the Chinese past while equally avoiding to
study China’s interaction with the world primarily under the aegis of Western-based models of
development. In a successive step I will compare some selected features of China’s
internationalization during the 1920s with parallel phenomena during the post-Mao period. I will
argue that many aspects of Chinese modern history are in fact best to be understood as local
manifestations of global currents or as counteractions to certain images of global trends. After
discussing some structural changes at an economic and social level, I will deal with the global
connectedness of Chinese intellectual milieus. Looking at the conservatives as a prime example, I
will demonstrate that Chinese traditionalists and nationalists were in fact part of a larger, trans-
cultural intellectual and social milieu. This global milieu was characterized by a rather intensive
flow of people and ideas and shared values. Even though they were located in different world
regions conservative intellectuals typically came even from similar social backgrounds, which
were in some regards the bi-products of international economic transformations.
Needless to say the conservatives are only one example for globally connected socio-cultural milieus – other examples are the communists or the pro-Western liberal camp, just to name the most prominent ones. Such trans-culturally connected intellectual camps with a political agenda are an important feature of civil societies in our current age. Underneath the world of NGOs and international institutions\textsuperscript{7}, which all might be understood as the sprouts of a global civil society, there are still nationally or regionally confined civil societies. After a rather intensive scholarly debate during the early 1990s most China scholars now agree that the term “civil society” is indeed applicable to the modern Chinese experience\textsuperscript{8}. However, there is an equal degree of consensus that we need to widen our parameters of what constitutes a civil society significantly beyond the Western experience. The reason is that civil societies remain conditioned by other social, cultural, and economic factors, and indeed no process of complete convergence can be expected.\textsuperscript{9} Local and global elements will remained intermingled in highly complex ways.

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The time from the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century to the end of the Cultural Revolution has been overall a traumatic experience in Chinese history. The period witnessed arguably one of the most disastrous combinations of warfare, social upheaval, political turmoil, economic crises, and cultural disbanding in the memory of China. The socio-cultural and political nexus of China, which had never been never static but which also had not experienced a genuine historical rupture for more than two millennia, was fundamentally restructured within a few decades. Some core institutions and patterns of the former Middle Kingdom largely disintegrated, especially during the first few decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.
Up until the 19th century China had stood rather firmly within its own regional historical context. It had not been challenged profoundly as an integrated cultural and political system. Certain institutional settings such as the official examination system, the state rituals, or even the structure of the court ministries had undergone significant changes and adaptations, but as a whole they had never been completely discontinued for significant periods of time. And at the latest since the Neo-Confucian revival of the 9th century certain sacred texts had remained a common cultural reference system for more than a thousand years to come. The exegesis may have changed profoundly but the textual fundaments of the official orthodoxy, in which all members of the elite partook in one way or another, had remained solid. Even repeated conquests by peoples from the grasslands Northern and Western grasslands did not shake China as a civilizational entity. Conquerors such as the Mongols or the Manchus had been under extreme pressure to adapt to the cultural pattern of China that it proved difficult for them to retain a distinct socio-cultural core. For that matter the Chinese relationship to the “barbarian” tribes of East Asia has been compared to the interaction between a sword and a pillow: if you hit a pillow with a sword, the former will bend around the latter.

Needless to say, the period after the middle of the 19th century coincided with the rapid opening of China to a quickly unfolding international or global system. It would certainly be incorrect to follow the traditional Sino-centric view that the Middle Kingdom had been essentially isolated from the rest of the world. Quite to the contrary, during all periods of Chinese history one can observe a varying pattern of economic and cultural exchanges with the world beyond. In its relations to other East Asian societies, China not only figured as a giant cultural star shining on its surrounding satellites, but it also received a reverse influence from them. Yet - again with varying degrees of intensity - there were also ties with more distant lands such as India, Europe, and Southeast Asia. At this level one may think of the Buddhist conquest of China
during the 3rd and 4th centuries AD or of the impact of Jesuit translations on Chinese astronomy.
China was even directly affected by the first truly worldwide system of trade flows during the
16th century, when the influx of silver from the Americas led to inflation within the late-Ming
economic system.

But the outward relations of China during the past 150 years have been of a different
nature. Historically speaking it is a matter of fact that the rather sudden collapse of the social,
cultural, and political pattern of China from the late 1800 onwards was intrinsically linked to the
country’s integration into a rapidly evolving international system. Until quite recently this
process has been mainly analyzed using the methodological frameworks of China’s
modernization, its opening, and its encounter with the West. The underlying assumption was that
Chinese civilization was ill fated once it encountered the more dynamic, aggressive, and
expansive culture of modernity. Two or three decades ago a majority of scholars conceptualized
modernity as a European export product, as a civilization destined to hollow out all traditional
cultural patterns and to leave their skins remaining in the form of folklore. For modernization
theorists and many other academic schools the main direction of intellectual inquiry was the
question of why China did not manage to internalize the essence of the Western model
successfully. Consequently, many scholarly analyses treated China’s turmoil during the 19th and
20th centuries as a series of failed responses to the challenges posed by the modern West. It has
been pointed out very often that such mono-linear notions of development, which basically
assume that all countries would eventually follow along the same path, are heavily Euro-centric.

In the meantime such critical notions of universal models derived from the Western
experience alone have become a dominant set of assumptions within the social sciences. Already
at a rather early stage Paul Cohen’s call for a “China-centered” approach to Chinese history
received a broad echo in the landscape of scholarly debates. He suggested to refrain from
imposing Western-based theories and concepts onto the Chinese experience. Today this notion is assumption has become part of a wider trend - the so-called “cultural turn” or its latest offspring, the “spatial turn” in the social sciences. The underlying development has been the deconstruction of the former master narratives of social theory by upholding the validity of the culturally or regionally specific experience. Within historiography this was certainly not a novelty since the field’s disciplinary culture had always valued the particular experience, which was to be explored through primary sources. But in the accounts on China’s opening from the late 19th century onwards the “culturalization” of the field amounted to a paradigm change. In a certain way it would not be wrong to state that the disciplinary culture of historiography replaced the traditional social sciences as the main framework of analysis for the internationalization or globalization of China during the past one hundred or more years.

Yet like in any promising development lies a certain danger in its complete preeminence, which calls for a certain reconsideration without returning to the shortcomings of the previously dominating system of assumptions. If scholarship overemphasizes the particularities of Chinese historical development we may exclude some important dimensions of 19th and 20th century Chinese history. An important aspect of the past would become marginalized if we would not pay due attention to the global dimension of the processes that affected China in the realms of culture, society, government, and the economy. This raises the question of the comparability of the Chinese experience to other regions around the world. For example, highly divergent phenomena such as the advent of state authoritarianism during the 1930s or the spread of urban mass culture roughly a decade before were in fact newly emerging phenomena in most world regions. Since these processes were equally new in the European and North American context, it would be wrong to perceive them as processes of Westernization.
Another intellectual challenge when describing China’s encounter with globalization and its predecessors is the important regional dynamic in the emergence and transmission of transformative processes. In the Chinese context it was Japan that served as a decisive reference point for Chinese “modernizers” and that provided an important knot in the transmission of globally circulating ideas and social structures to China. For example, more students during China’s early stage of “internationalization” during the early decades of the 20th century have gained their – in the Chinese context – revolutionary ideas during stays in Japan. Similarly the economic boom from the late 1970s onwards would have been unthinkable without regional investments – from the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Singapore. Research has just started to focus on the role of the greater East Asian region in Chinese 20th century history. Gaining a better understanding of the regional dynamics will require a series of detailed analyses of social networks, the flow of ideas, and economic ties between East Asian countries and their regional hubs.

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It goes without saying that a paper entitled “China and Globalization” cannot even sketch out the entire history of China’s interaction with the world beyond. It will not even be possible to consider the entire 20th century. Rather I will focus on the 1920s, when in many regards the degree and kind of internationalizations of China were most comparable to today, as will be outlined in this paper. Of course also during Mao’s rule from 1949 to 1976 China was continuously being restructured while heavily relating to Socialism or Communism, which were in fact globally circulating doctrines and ideas. Additional examples for the degree of internationalization during the People’s Republic under Mao are the role of Soviet advisors during the early years and China’s later quest to become the leader of the Third World. However,
during the first three decades of the People’s Republic of China and especially during the Cultural Revolution Chinese society remained largely isolated from global influence. Liberal capitalism with all its effects on the economy, culture, and society had been shut off for almost three decades. Analogous to the pre-World War II era liberal capitalism has a decisive influence in China once again, which means that formerly important actors such as Japan and many Western countries have re-appeared in China once again. Certainly it is not understood in terms of a simple continuation of an interrupted development of the 1920s and the early 1930s, since there are still important differences between both periods.

China’s disastrous experiences ever since the middle of the 19th century were not only due to external factors - domestic factors would also funnel into the crisis of China to come. First and foremost there was the demographic problem; it is estimated that the population exploded from about 65 million people at the beginning of the Qing-dynasty in 1644 to about 300 million a century of a half later. Around 1800 the economy began to become seriously strained in face of a rapidly growing population – one of the main symptoms of the ensuing population crisis was increasing poverty among the rural population. Furthermore, throughout the first half of the dynasty the official bureaucracy did not grow in number, so by the year 1800 the capacity of the central authority networks to efficiently administer the huge empire diminished rather quickly. In addition corruption started to become a widespread problem among the ruling elites. The combination of these and other domestic factors were the major root causes of the Taiping Rebellion, arguably the most destructive civil war in the history of China and largely the result of domestic causes.

However, around 1900 it became evident that this would not just be another downturn in the dynastic cycle, but that the entire political and cultural system would be in jeopardy. The advent of Western powers and the rise of Japan, which was painfully experienced by China’s
defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, started to shake the country’s cultural universe. It became obvious that China would have to adapt to the international environment in order to survive in the world, which Chinese politicians and intellectuals alike started to understand increasingly in terms of a Social Darwinian jungle\textsuperscript{15}. For increasing segments of Chinese elites it became painfully clear that their country’s international standing had degraded to the position of a sleeping giant who was in danger of becoming colonialized by superior powers – to which even now Japan, after having learned from the West, now belonged. A sense of an imminent and necessary historical discontinuity and of radical changes pervaded the minds of Chinese elites, and only an unprecedented historical discontinuity could save the country from being colonized. Even the staunchest defenders of a certain Chinese “cultural essence” did so increasingly in the spirit of mobilizing a counterforce against the overwhelming spirit of the time.

What followed quickly was a major dismantling of historically grown institutions – the Confucian civil service examinations that had selected the scholar official bureaucracy for about two millennia were abolished in 1905. Western style universities and colleges focusing on the sciences, foreign languages, and engineering took their place. The Revolution of 1911 dismantled the court and tried to set up a constitutional democratic republic. This endeavor failed – the telos of constitutionalism lost credibility first through the quasi-dictatorship by Yuan Shikai and then, after his death in 1916, through a decade, in which the country was fragmented under the rule of warlords. It was only Chiang Kai-shek’s Northern Expedition in the years 1926 and 1927 that re-established a certain central authority under the rule of the Kuomintang Party. However, it was not socialism nor liberal democracy but the right-wing totalitarian movements of Italy and later Germany that became role models for Chiang Kai-shek\textsuperscript{16}. Ever since the revolution what remained a basic pattern is that the Chinese government actively sought to transform the country according to foreign role models and with the active help of international advisors. However in a
country that was characterized by strong searching behavior\textsuperscript{17}, by the quest to build a sustainable modern society in a quickly transforming world, the ideal role models changed quickly. With the Communists as an ever-increasing power in the political scene of China there were competing visions of doctrines, ideologies and international role models that were thought as necessary to transform China. What rivalling political camps had in common was the effort to introduce mass mobilization through propaganda; also introduced were boycotts and strikes as instruments to apply political pressure\textsuperscript{18}.

But of course political rivalries were not the only arena in which China was subject to heavy international influence. The country experienced a wide range of transformations according to newly defined international standards. In addition to the already mentioned revolution in the education system the Chinese governments, especially after 1927, electrified large parts of the country while an ever-growing network of railroads and highways connected the big cities. Furthermore a regulated postal system and police force were established, a health care system was developed, and new concepts of family life and family planning were promoted by the government and spread through other channels (like what). There were also concerted efforts to modernize agriculture and the military with the help of foreign advisors. Below the government level a heavily internationalized city culture developed with cinemas, theatres, coffeehouses and boulevards in which a newly formed jeunesse dorée would stroll up and down and display the latest fashion\textsuperscript{19}. In addition, economic developments lead to growing industrial proletariat and an emerging business “bourgeoisie”\textsuperscript{20} – formerly unknown milieus in Chinese society. And internationally circulating ideas also brought a identity patterns and value-systems that contributed to the spread of class-consciousness within these new segments of society.

In Shanghai and other coastal cities English newspapers were published, a banker’s association ran its own journal, and ambitious city planners tried to design a then futuristic Pearl
of the Orient. In reality 65% of Chinese economy was still conducted in the agrarian sector and 75% of the overall Chinese population still lived in the countryside. Clearly a gap widened between internationally connected global hubs on the coast and a huge hinterland, in which the masses were living without the fruits of modernization but increasingly not without knowledge of its promises. Even before the 20th century certain areas in China such as the Yangtze-Delta, central Sichuan or the area around Beijing had been far more economically prosperous and socially advanced than other areas of China. But now the socio-cultural gap that emerged now divided city and countryside as well as the coast and the heartland. Neither the coasts nor the cities had been centers for the traditional Chinese literati elite.

However, the growing socio-cultural polarization of China did not mean that the countryside remained unaffected by international connections. Also in Chinese villages consumption patterns decisively changed, which was partly the result of marketing campaigns conducted by internationally operating corporate giants21. For example, during the 1920s Standard Oil gave away tin lamps in order to create an additional market for oil, which was distributed through a network of rural administrators and urban offices. Also national and international tobacco corporations infiltrated the world of Chinese villages, just like the cities to their own products. Marketing techniques often tried to utilize patriotic sentiments with brand names such as “Love Thy Country”-cigarettes. But the socio-economic pattern of the Chinese hinterland was influenced by an increasingly internationalizing economy. For example the Western tobacco consortium BAT, which by 1927 had largely succeeded to drive the Chinese Nanyang Company out of the Chinese market, had more than 260,000 Chinese farmers as contract tobacco growers. Also the production of other items for the global mass market such as fertilizer, cotton, and animal feed changed the structure of Chinese agricultural production to a significant extent22.
Due to this international connectedness the Chinese countryside became largely dependent on fluctuations in the world market within decades. This became painfully evident in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. At first the return of the world to the gold standard gave China, whose currency was based on silver, and inflationary boom through the sudden influx of silver and the more favorable currency exchange rates for export. However, after Great Britain returned to the silver standard in 1932 and the United States decided to change a quarter of its own currency reserves to silver, the crisis began to impact China. The rising prices for silver caused a sharp decline in exports, which in turn led to a sudden pauperization of the Chinese countryside. More than 5% of the farmers left their homelands and in their search for a decent future flowed into the urban centers.

Even though both urban centers and the Chinese countryside were both exposed to a then already globalizing world; they were not affected in the same way. The communists were the political power that managed to utilize this growing divergence for its own purposes by recruiting political support primarily among the peasantry. Also today we see a similar structure, a similar polarization of the Chinese socio-cultural landscape between the urban centers with direct global connections and the rest of the country with indirect global connections. In recent years Multinational Corporations (MNCs) have again started to concentrate their production and administrative facilities in a few international centers, which is strikingly similar to the pattern that was predominant during the 1920s and 1930s. Like during the Interwar Period also today internationally operating corporations tend to concentrate their main business activities on the rather pricey centers like Shanghai or Canton. The main reasons for this concentration in a few key areas are not only the usual factors such as infrastructure and the availability of skilled labor, but also the need for legal security. Whereas during the Interwar Period foreign treaty concessions guaranteed a high degree of legal security in cities such as Shanghai, today the
Chinese city governments want to attract international investors by minimizing corruption and providing clear legal standards.

It is quite possible that the gap between the rural areas, the poor in the urban centers, and the emerging middle class will continue to grow and cause severe tension. Masses of migrant workers are flocking to affluent urban centers in search of employment. At the same time the pressure on industrial labor in the Chinese hinterland has risen significantly. In the inner provinces the unemployment resulting from the demise of state-owned corporations as a consequence of international competition is not matched by a booming private economy. Still the Chinese government tries to prevent this structural unemployment from growing any further by obliging the state-banking sector to support the former socialist conglomerates\textsuperscript{24}. The impact of bad loans on the financial sector has grown significantly, and so far it remains unclear how long the government will be able to continue preventing further pauperization in the Chinese provinces.

The torpid social, cultural and political currents between the rich islands in China and the surrounding seas of poverty may lead one to assume that China will not be able to escape the same social tensions and eventual political turmoil as during the Interwar Period. However, some decisive differences between the first and second periods of globalization provide reasons to be more optimistic. Firstly, today the central government is far less fragmented than during the 1920s and 1930s, when only for a few Chiang Kai-shek’s \textit{de facto} dictatorship provided a still somewhat unstable government rule. Today there are no independent warlords and no rivaling political parties\textsuperscript{25} that are setting up their own territories as a home base for a revolution to come. Secondly, the government can utilize an administrative network, which has grown since the beginning of the Chinese Republic. Thirdly the accessibility of the Chinese countryside may still be inferior compared to more affluent societies, yet in terms of infrastructure (including
electrification, the school system and the literacy rate of the overall population, and the standardization of measures) the country is far less torn by differences as it was about 80 years ago. It thus seems unlikely that China will fall back into a degree of chaos comparable to the decades after the Chinese Revolution of 1911.

When looking at both periods in question, one clearly recognizes decisive differences in the nature of China’s economic ties to the world. During the Interwar Period China’s main trading partners were for the most part powers, such as Japan, Britain, and France,– that were either trying to retain their status as colonial powers or seeking to expand it. Even though many concessions were returned to the Chinese authorities before the beginning of World War II in Asia, economic ties were for a large part structurally unequal. Today, however, the Chinese government consciously limits the political influence of international corporations. One very common instrument of economic policy is the insistence on joint ventures as the predominant pattern of foreign direct investment in China. Also the origin of foreign investment has changed significantly: during the Interwar Period the Chinese Diaspora played a only a minor role, but now investments from Greater China (which encompasses Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore as well as the Overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia and the West\textsuperscript{26}) provide a steady influx of capital and skilled labor.

The increasing dependency of the Chinese economy on overseas Chinese networks has contributed to a discourse of an emerging a distinctively Chinese pattern of capitalism, which would be characterized by features such as the importance of personal networks\textsuperscript{27}. The assumption of a Chinese form of capitalism is a highly contested issue though. What cannot be denied though is that the notion is a prominent discourse within the Chinese and Overseas Chinese business community, which in turn helps to fortify business relations with bolstering walls of cultural identity. The intensive relationship between the Chinese Diaspora and the
Chinese heartland may indeed indicate the growing meaning of cultural identity in economic transactions. If this will (as some scholars argue)–eventually lead to a growing importance of de-localized cultural networks in the future of capitalism remains to be seen. It is certain that today, unlike during the 1920s, cultural factors receive greater attention in international business. Many internationally operating businesses have begun to allocate significant resources into cultural research and manager trainings.

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The heavy transformations outlined above were intrinsically linked to profound changes in the way the Chinese would define themselves in relation to the world. Ever since the 1920s the search for a modern China has certainly not solely been an elite discourse. In fact nationalism or even jingoism spread quickly across the country through all strata of societies and across all rivaling political camps. Certainly the advent of nationalism is a prime example for global transformative process, which also affected China, albeit in a specific way. The emergence of a mass-based identity pattern depending on political agitation and mass media was a new phenomenon within the historical context of China. Also certain key features of Chinese nationalism were – and still are – more similar to other forms of nationalism than to traditional Chinese identity patterns. For example, the typical nationalistic territorial identity and the feeling of humiliation as a unifying trauma did not have deeply rooted predecessors in the cultural and historical context of China. The discourse of national humiliation presumes the existence of an international community of sovereign states and equal rights, which has recently emerged in the cultural context of China. It was linked to the equally new postulates for self-strengthening, for awakening China – of which the unifying force of national sentiments were considered to be a major part.
So from its very beginning Chinese nationalism was heavily dependent on awareness of the international world and especially of the West as a primary reference system. However, since China was never subject to colonial rule by a single country, the international reference system remained quite vague. It was varying from single nation states or great powers to an ill-defined and highly imagined “West”. Still some major trends in the past century can be observed. Whereas during the Interwar Period European nations and Japan still dominated Chinese international consciousness, after World War II America took the place as the symbol of modernity and the essence of the “West”. In the political semantics of China “Americanization” (meihua) has replaced terms such as “Europeanization” (ouhua) or “Euro-Americanization” (oumeihua). Like European countries before, today the United States is perceived as the engine or the forerunner of transformative processes on a global scale. In general, the relationship between Chinese nationalism and this primary reference society can be described as a love-hate relationship, a mixture of admiration and disdain, an amalgamation of hope and threat.

The case of Chinese nationalism underlines the simple truth that growing international awareness and the global spread of cultural transformation does not lead to a homogenous world. Rather highly particularistic identities, which are partly based on anti-foreignism, can also be products of globalizing influence. It is also not correct to assume that the advent of global urban cultures in the 1920s and again in the late 1980s led to a decline of nationalist sentiments. Jingoism and consumerism are not mutually exclusive but rather appear as parallel or even tightly interconnected phenomena. When looking at student nationalism, one can easily recognize that at many points during the twentieth century it was students, one of the most internationally connected part of the population, which were first prone to have a strong nationalistic identity with anti-Western undertones. Not only did they get a chance to learn about world affairs, to read Western and Japanese works in translations – there was also the beginning of a mass migration of
students that brought tens of thousands mainly to Japan, but also to European countries and the
United States.

Sociologically speaking, student radicalism reflected the emergence of the intellectual as
a new socio-cultural prototype within Chinese society. Unlike the Confucian literati, who had to
be politically moderate since the Middle Kingdom was resting upon their shoulders, now Chinese
thinkers were mainly intellectuals, i.e. highly politicized urban dwellers who found themselves on
the margin of the national power system. When looking at the intellectual debates about the
future of China during the Interwar Period and in recent years it becomes evident that the patterns
of solutions tended to be Chinese adaptations of globally circulating discourses. In other words,
all intellectual and political attempts at removing the new “Sick man of the East” from his
deathbed were to a high degree local adaptations of globally circulating ideas that each depended
on global political and intellectual networks as well worldwide support structures for certain
types of ideas.

Most of the younger Chinese intellectuals were in such extreme favor of European-style
modernization, of the eschatology of progress, that the events of World War I failed to make
them reconsider their attitudes towards Chinese culture. Many continued to conceptualize
European culture as superior. During this time the increasing outward orientation of many
Chinese intellectuals was accompanied by hostile, if not iconoclastic attitudes towards the own
culture. For example, in one of his many articles for the journal New Youth (Xin Qingnian) Chen
Duxiu expressed this common sentiment that had become a predominant opinion among the
urban students with the following words:

There are two radically different types of culture in the world: The Oriental cultures and
the Occidental cultures. In essence [the Oriental cultures] have not moved out of the ancient
traces of civilization, therefore they are the remains of old civilization. What can be really called
modern culture is the Occidental culture uniquely possessed by the Europeans; it is known as European and Western culture. ... The Western culture possesses characteristics that are radically different from those of the ancient cultures and give people a sense of freshness.²⁹

The most famous global intellectual current that circulated in China in the aftermath of World War I was communism that started to get a foothold in China during the early 1920s with theoretical guidelines being produced mainly in the Soviet Union and disseminated all over the world through a tight network of agents and agitators. Other groups were more prone to Western liberalism, which often was embedded in Wilsonian ideals. Even the so-called “conservatives” were part of a larger international group. These scholars pointed to the Great War to show that Western modernity was not only a promise but also a danger, that it not only contained progressive elements but also had a highly destructive potential. As a matter of fact the conservatives were supported by a transcultural community of likeminded people with similar interests, agendas, and to a certain extent also social background. This international network gained more prominence in the aftermath of World War I, which had reinforced and socially expanded doubts about Europe or the West as the only universalizable, the only teaching civilization.

For example, European intellectuals such as Romain Rolland, René Guénon or Rudolf Eucken, a philosopher at the University of Jena and Nobel Prize laureate in literature³⁰ or the Indian Nobel Price laureate Rabindranath Tagore were in close contacts with likeminded Chinese intellectuals. So even the critical Chinese image of Europe had strong roots in Europe itself, especially Germany and France but also other countries, albeit to a lesser extent. Here the critique of an allegedly empty, purely materialistic form of modernity had a long tradition – actually with movements such as the Storm and Stress Period or romanticism it was as old as modernity itself.
From a viewpoint of global history the conservatives’ attitudes towards Europe is particularly interesting for several reasons. Firstly it was the cultural conservatives and not the other intellectual groups who added an additional dimension to their intellectual agenda. They were in fact the only group who held the belief that China could do more than partake in universal processes; they maintained that China or the entire East would have something to give to Europe and the entire West. Secondly the intellectual audience of some leading conservatives was more international than any of their socialist or liberalist counterparts.

However, people arguing to uphold a certain cultural core in China were rather marginalized during the Interwar Period. By contrast, today the concept of Chinese tradition, the sense of historical rootedness enjoys far greater prominence among Chinese intellectuals. During the 1980s the “High Culture Fever” provided another wave of iconoclastic movements. Their aversion and distrust of Chinese tradition certainly carried on the progressivism and historical materialism of Marxism. “Enlightenment” was the battle cry of an intellectual community that now sought its own country’s salvation in another complete transformation. Imitating the affluent democracies of the West and their liberal, democratic cultures was supposed to allow China to soar as a major international player in the 21st century. Similar ideas were also prominent among Western observers, who predicted that China would overtake America by copying the American model.

However, during the past 10 years the pattern of the Chinese intellectual landscape has changed profoundly. A certain disillusionment with the promises of globalization and, in numerous cases, negative personal experiences with China’s modernization have led to a certain right-wing turn among many Chinese intellectuals. The predominant mood is now characterized by a growing aversion to the West and the rise of nationalism. However, this nationalism is
largely defined in negative terms; it is largely grounded upon the postulate to stand up against Western humiliation and the notion of victimhood. Underneath the strong voices against the imposition of Western models onto China is a sense of cultural loss. Traditional elements like Confucianism continue to be discarded by the majority of Chinese intellectuals.

However, even the anti-Western discourses are partly drawing upon globally circulating ideas. For example, postmodern patterns of thinking provided a conceptual support structure for intellectual movements that worked on re-affirming the cultural divide between China and the West and tried to promote a telos of cultural autarky. Groups such as Houxue (Post-studies) enjoyed a sudden rise to prominence about 10 years ago. Also in Japan and in India postmodern deconstructions of Western modernity’s normative claims have played – and still play – a less nationalistic but equally important role in intellectual debates. It would be fruitful to explore the reasons for the spread of post-modernism as globally circulating critiques of the West, which themselves are of Western origin. To tackle this question from a global perspective one could theorize about certain insecurities about the essence of the respective traditions that may underlie all the affirmations of otherness and subjectivity. One also could study the role and the underlying motives of diaspora communities in the West, one could regard major American and European universities as intellectual trans-shipment centers, and one also could track down global intellectual milieus and even financial support structures such as certain foundations. In addition it would be prolific to look at worldwide social transformations such as the common emergence of an internationally exposed urban intelligentsia as a seedbed for the global transmission and adaptation of commonly shared ideas and their regionally specific representations and institutionalizations.

Like in the Islamic world the arguably rising tide of anti-Westernism and anti-globalism in China is not just a reaction pattern generating anti-Western and anti-global sentiments. Quite to
the contrary, even nationalistic discourses are for a large part local manifestations of globally dispersed ideas, which are prominent among people that belong to trans-cultural social milieus.

When comparing the ideas about internationalization (or globalization) among Chinese intellectuals, politicians, and business leaders during the Interwar Period and today one can detect some striking similarities, but also one crucial difference. Today the understanding of modernization as Westernization plays only a marginal role, and the quest to establish alternative models of modernity is dominating the debates. Such acclamations of cultural particularities in China just like in most other parts of the world suggest that the global age will not be the age of the homogenous global village. To balance this justified quest for cultural pluralism with a sense of shared commitment to a global community will be one of the major challenges of the future.
Annotated Bibliography

- Zhao, Yiheng. ’Houxue’ yu Zhongguo’. In: *Ershiyi shiji* 27: 4 – 11


For many farmers such products were often not the main source of living, but a secondary income. See Osterhammel (1989).


From the late 1920s onwards the Communists established regional home bases. The KMT-government’s attacks led to the Long March.


This marginalization combined with a high degree of political awareness and social concern may be one of the major factor for political radicalism that surfaced time and again during the 20th century. See Yü, Ying-shih. 1993. ‘The Radicalization of China in the Twentieth Century’. Daedalus: China in Transformation 122 (2):125 - 150.

Chen Duxiu. 1916. ‘The French and Modern Civilization’. In: Xin Qingnian 1.


See for example Zhao, Yiheng. 'Houxue’ yu Zhongguo’. In: Ershiyi shiji 27: 4 – 11.


For example, on a psycho-social level it has been suggested that Chinese students in the West that try to promote post-modern concepts in their home country do so to cope with their experiences abroad. See Wang Yichuan, Zhang Fa, and Tao Gongfeng. ‘Bianyuan, zhongxin, dongfang, xifang’. In: Dushu 1: 146 – 151.
Bio-Data

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