Modernization and Transformation of Twentieth-Century Asia

Modernization and transformation of China

I. Nationalism (Professor David Faure)

II. Modernity and modernization: vision and reality

A One hundred years, two metaphorical ships
- 1794: British embassy Lord George Macartney: China is an “old, crazy first rate man of war” that will be “dashed to pieces”.
- 1903: Liu E: China is a great ship that “is going to capsize any moment”

B From Self-strengthening Movement to Constitutional Monarchy
- 1842: Wei Yuan: “Study the barbarians’ advanced skills so as to subdue the barbarians.”
- 1906: Empress Dowager Cixi: “The only choice is to adopt the constitutional monarchy.”

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A. One hundred years, two metaphorical ships

1793-1794: Lord George Macartney, British embassy to China:

- The Empire of China is an old, crazy First rate man-of-war, which a fortunate succession of able and vigilant officers has contrived to keep afloat for these one hundred and fifty years past, and to overawe their neighbours merely by her bulk and appearance, but whenever an insufficient man happens to have the command upon deck, adieu to the discipline and safety of the ship. She may perhaps not sink outright; she may drift some time as a wreck, and will then be dashed to pieces on the shore; but she can never be rebuilt on the old bottom.

- The breaking-up of the power of China (no very improbable event) would occasion a complete subversion of the commerce, not only to Asia, but a very sensible change in the other quarters of the world. The industry and ingenuity of the Chinese would be checked and enfeebled, but they would not be annihilated. Her ports could no longer be barricadoed; they would be attempted by all the adventurers of all trading nations, who would search every channel, creek, and cranny of China for a market, and for some time be the cause of much rivalry and disorder. Nevertheless as Great Britain, from the weight for her riches and the genius and spirit of her people, is become the first political, marine and commercial power on the globe, it is reasonable to think that she would prove the greatest gainer by such a revolution as I have alluded to, and rise superior over every competitor.

- But to take things solely as they are now, and to bound our views by the visible horizon of our situation, without speculating upon probable events (which seldom take place according to our speculations), our present interests, our reason, and our humanity equally forbid the thoughts of any offensive measures with regard to the Chinese, whilst a ray of hope remains for succeeding by gentle ones. Nothing could be urged in favour of an hostile conduct, but an irresistible conviction of failure by forbearance. [1]

The Travels of Lao Ts’an: [2]


B. From Self-strengthening Movement to Constitutional Monarchy

- Wei Yuan, Preface to Haiguo tuzhi (1842): “For what is this book written? For the purpose of attacking the barbarians with the barbarians, of accommodating the barbarians with the barbarians, of learning the advanced technology of the barbarians so as to subdue the barbarians. [3]
- September 1st 1906: Empress Dowager’s decree: “According to memorials by Zai Ze and others, the weakness of the country is the result of lack of communication between the upper and the lower, between the inner and the outside. The government knows not how to protect its people while the people knows not how to defend the country. In a situation like today, we cannot but imitate and carry out constitutional monarchy, so that the power is concentrated in the court while the daily administration is opened to the public opinion...” [4]


C. A lone cry

Lu Xun, A Prejudiced and Extremist View of Culture (1908): [5]

- China is well known for its self-imposed greatness. Those who are good at criticism would accuse China of being stubborn and conservative and predict that China would perish.
Contemporary people, having occasionally heard of words of reform, also feel ashamed and think of reform. Only ideas that conform to the West are discussed, and only policies that conform to the West are carried out. Their only fear is that they have not done enough in discarding and attacking their own tradition. They want to correct previous mistakes and pursue wealth and power for China. …


• …Consequently, it is obvious that the European civilization of the 19th century will surpass the previous generations and reign over Asia and the East. …Contemporary China, suffering from internal crises and foreign threats, must not remain unchanged. …However, were proposals to reform and save China themselves wrong, even though we change our tradition everyday and keep crying and shouting, what help can be hoped for as far as the current crises are concerned? That is why enlightened people must have a real understanding of the general situation of the world, must measure and compare, must get rid of prejudice and obtain the essence. [Proposals to reform China] must neither lag behind the trend of the world nor lose touch with China’s tradition. **We must learn from the present and restore the past and create a new tradition. Only then can our lives become more meaningful. Only then can our compatriots develop their self-consciousness and enhance their individuality. Only then can a country of sand become a country of people. …**

• Now, let me challenge those who claim themselves revolutionaries. Would you define civilization as wealth? The Jewish Diaspora are good at business. Even the best European merchants are no match to them. Yet what happens to the Jewish people? Would you define civilization as rails and mines? In the last fifty years Africa and Australia have been busy constructing rails and mining. Yet how about the civilizations of the natives of the two continents? Would you define civilization as democracy? Spain and Portugal have long been constitutional monarchies. Yet how about their current situation? Would you regard culture as having its foundation in the material? Yet can a country really reign over the world by
displaying machines and accumulating food? Would you regard the truth as laying in the majority? Then if a man stay with a bunch of monkeys, will he stay on the tree and eat nuts? Even women and children will not agree [with such answers]. These are indeed what Europe and America show off to the world, but these are only shots and flowers that are easily detected. The root lies deep and is difficult to locate. The foundation of the strength of Europe and America is their people. **To survive the world and compete among nations, the primary task is to cultivate the people.** How to cultivate the people? By respecting their individuality and enhancing their spirit. …

**D. May Fourth and the Aftermath**

1919: Chen Duxiu invited Messrs Democracy and Science

- … What they accuse of this journal is nothing except such crime as destroying Confucianism, destroying the Rites, destroying tradition, destroying chastity, destroying old ethics (loyalty, filial piety, integrity), destroying old arts (Chinese opera), destroying old religions (ghosts and deity), destroying old literature and destroying old politics (privilege and nepotism)
- Of these crime we comrades of this journal are certainly convicted without reservation. However, to begin with, …only because we support Messrs Democracy and Science do we commit such grave crime. To support Mr. Democracy, we cannot but oppose Confucianism, Rites, chastity, old ethics and old politics. To support Mr. Science, we cannot but oppose old arts and old religion. To support both Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science, we cannot but oppose tradition and old literature. …
- The Westerners, in order to support Messrs Democracy and Science, have caused much disturbance and shed much blood. Only then did Messrs Democracy and Science gradually saved them from darkness and led them into the bright world. **We now realize that only these two Messrs can overcome all the darkness in Chinese politics, ethics, scholarships and thoughts.** No political oppression, social accusation, nor even loss of lives will deter us
Tang Degang: The Two Great Transformation in Chinese History

- Let me ask a fundamental question: what exactly is the nature of the “changing situation” in late Qing? In a nutshell, this “change” is the working of a social transformation. In Chinese history of the last two millenia, such social transformation occurs only twice. The first occurred in the second and third centuries B.C., the second occurs in Li Hongzhang’s and our time.

- The first great transformation started in the late Eastern Zhou dynasty and ended by the times of the First Emperor of Qing and Emperor Wu of Han. It took hundreds of years for the transformation to be completed and a new pattern created. The new pattern lasted for two millennia till the late Qing, when the second great transformation took place.

- To understand the second transformation, we have to understand the first.

- Simply put, the first transformation involved changes in three aspects:

  - Finally, the abolition of feudalism and the establishment of the centralized Prefecture-County administration. Feudalism is the remnant of primitive tribalism. Prefecture-County administration is the bureaucratic system of the centralized great empire. It is a great leap forward in terms of political administration.

  - Secondly, the abolition of the public ownership of land and the creation of the land market. Such change took place in early Eastern Zhou dynasty and was realized by Shang Yang during the time of Lord Xiao of Qin. The land market exists for two millenium till 1950s, when Mao Zedong briefly abolished it during his land reform. Wang Mang also tried similar measure but lost his head before succeeding in his land reform.

  - Thirdly, the domination of official ideology at the expense of freedom of thoughts. The
First Emperor of Qin favoured the Legalist School. The Wu Emperor of Han favoured the Confucianist School. They differed in their favour but were the same in favouring one school at the expense of freedom of thoughts.

- It took hundreds of years, at the cost of tens of millions of lives, for ancient Chinese state and society to accomplish the first great transformation in term of these three “insignificant” aspects. The pattern of the centralized empire was the product of the first great transformation and remained unchanged for two millennia until the late Qing.

- The first great transformation lasted for about three hundred years and created a pattern of agricultural empire. What will come out of the second great transformation? The future pattern will also be founded on three principles:

  - Firstly, from the power of the emperor to the power of the people. Li Hongzhang did not live to see this but today we see this clearly. The transformation of political authority was clear. From the hereditary and absolute power of the Qing emperors and Empress Dowager, to Yuan Shikai, Jiang Jieshi and Mao Zedong, to today Deng Xiaoping’s “ruling behind the curtain”, to Li Denghui’s mutual check of power, such transformation of political power has taken eight decades. Although it caused tremendous suffering to our poor Chinese people, the diminishing of political power was obvious. It is still unknown as to when a new pattern of power of the people will be fixed but the trend is optimistic.

  - Secondly, from agricultural economy to industrial and commercial economy. Agricultural economy was the mode of production for the previous pattern. The mode of production for the present and the future should be one dominated by industry and commerce. Ever since Li Hongzhang launched the self-strengthening movement, the industrialization of Chinese economy has been carried out for more than a century, although without much success. Today, Taiwan has more or less finished its economic transformation whereas Mainland China is still finding its right path. As of today, Mainland China’s economy was still dominated by agriculture and therefore its political system is still fettered in the medieval mode. When such economic transformation will be accomplished I do not know. We historians are the audience,
Thirdly, from control of thoughts to freedom of thoughts. Culture evolves at the same pace with social and economic systems. Social and economic development will lead to corresponding change in culture. Look at the history of the world, you will not see a civilization with advanced culture but backward economy, nor with economy lagging behind but culture making progress. Consequently, when the economy takes off, freedom of thoughts will be realized. When the freedom of thoughts is realized, the economy will take off. Like the egg and the chicken, it is difficult to decide the causality of the two factors. This is both the essence and vision of the cultural transformation.

In the two-millennia history of our country, this second great transformation is being carried out for more than a century, at the cost of trillions of lives, and the new pattern is yet to be formed -- although this new pattern might appear at any moment now. [7]


People like Sun Yat Sen and Hu Shi were but a few famous and fortunate surfers of the turbulent tide. Heroes of the time are no match to heroes that make the time. "Time" is the objective, turbulent reality of the history, and the "heroes" are no more than the captains and sailors that brave the tide.

Frankly speaking, during this contest through the Historical Three Gorges, Kang Youwei, Sun Yat Sen, Yuan Shikai, Hu Shi, Jiang Jieshi, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping are but heroes or bears that caught most attention. Those who know the tide and narrowly escape from crises are heroes. Those who ignore the tide, have their ships wrecked and drown in the water are 70% hero and 30% bear, or 70% bear and 30% hero, or simply bear and no hero at all!

Together with these heroes and bears are tens of millions of nameless heroes. They are the real players of modernization. They keep their promise and devote to their action and work in silence and gradually push our ancient civilization into modernity.

Only the people are the heroes, those who catch attention, brandish flags and keep
shouting are usually bears that do more harm than good. We would have been much better off without them.[8]


- Li Zehou, *The duet of national enlightenment and national salvation* [9]
- National salvation = establishing a strong and unified nation state
- National enlightenment = respecting individual rights and freedom
- Chinese intelligentsia were caught in a dilemma. On the one hand they value individual right and freedom. On the other hand their strong nationalist feeling forces them to support the political authority which, they think, will defend the country.
- As a result, the duet of national enlightenment and national salvation ends up with salvation at the expense of enlightenment.