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Optimism and Scepticism regarding Progress in Late 19th-Century and Republican China

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS



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The Chinese Concept of “Progress”

Kai Vogelsang (University of Hamburg)

Regardless of whether one is optimistic or sceptical about “progress,” both positions share the basic assumption that “progress” is possible in the first place. The paper will address this basic assumption, discussing the circumstances under which the very concept of “progress” appeared and became plausible in China. While conceptual precursors may be traced back a long way in Chinese history, “progress” would seem to be a specifically modern concept that developed in the late Qing period. As such, it was part of a thoroughgoing transformation that led to an entirely new Chinese conceptual framework: “concentrating multiple meanings,” as Reinhart Koselleck put it, the concept of “progress” gathered together “a variety of the historical movement.” The paper will describe this variety by outlining the conceptual framework within which “progress” found its place in late Qing discourse. It argues that the Chinese concept of “progress” could only gain currency within an emerging semantic field that included modern concepts of “society,” “individuality,” “revolution,” “history,” and others. It was against this background of modern concepts that “progress” unfolded its potential for inspiring optimism and pessimism.



Despair and Utopianism in Modern China: Abolishing Boundaries

Peter Zarrow (Academia Sinica)

This paper argues that optimism and pessimism were not opposite qualities in modern Chinese thought but rather twinned elements. More precisely, modern Chinese intellectuals from the late Qing through the Republican period tended to simultaneously experience despair over the state of China and the world on the one hand, and utopian longings, hopes, and plans on the other. This paper does not focus on personality and emotions, though individual psychology played a role in the link between despair and utopianism, but rather on the intellectual structure that had developed around future-thinking by the beginning of the twentieth century. This paper relies on four case studies. First, Kang Youwei is properly known for having written the first full-scale Chinese utopia, and while in many ways he was a complacent, confident thinker, nonetheless his utopian vision was partly rooted in his despair over the inability of various governments to meet the demands they faced and partly in his existential despair over the condition of humankind. Second, Liang Qichao was less prone to utopian thinking, but he was committed to a progressive view of history and possessed at least glimpses of a glorious future, even while his writings were rooted in a rhetoric of despair. Third, Chen Duxiu is well known for his disdain for Chinese culture and attacks on Confucianism that formed the basis of his later turn to Communism, which was simultaneously a political and a utopian turn. And finally, Hu Shi, though apparently a committed to an optimistic faith in gradual progress, was pessimistic about human nature and despaired of the entire realm of politics, yet he also believed democratic institutions could be created *de novo* in China while consistently proclaiming a cosmopolitanism at odds with the nationalist temper of the day. Of course, not every intellectual in modern China displayed tendencies toward despair or utopianism, much less both. Anarchists tended to be utopian without being despairing; writers like Yu Dafu and even Lu Xun tended to be despairing. Zhang Shizhao, Cai Yuanpei, Dai Jitao, and others were more even-keeled. Nonetheless, the link between despair and utopianism was grounded in the structure of Chinese political thought as it had developed over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: climax of *kaozheng* philological research, cosmopolitan interest in science, and rise of the statecraft school; and the growing presence of the West. The collapse of imperialism Confucianism left particular strands of traditional philosophy to interact with the powerful impression made by social Darwinism. My argument is related to the interpretation of radicalism and teleological thinking that, in different ways, Yu Ying-shih and Joseph Levenson made. However, I emphasize that modern Chinese radicalism was rooted in utopianism, which was in turn rooted in a despairing analysis of the pressures facing a Chinese people who were, in the eyes of intellectuals, woefully unprepared for the modern world.



The Idea of Progress in Modern China. The Case of Yan Fu

Li Qiang 李強 (Peking University)

In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the mainstream of Chinese thought experienced profound change unparalleled in the history of China. One of the most important changes was the rejection of the traditional Chinese ideas of cyclical change or regression, and adoption the idea of progress from the West. Yan Fu played a critical role in introducing and popularizing the idea of progress through propagating the idea of evolution he found from Darwinism.

Yen Fu's introduction of Western evolutionary theory first and foremost aimed to challenge the traditional conservatism and argue for radical changes in the face of severe national crisis in China. Through evolutionary theory, he described the human world, together with the natural world, as conforming to universal laws. He interpreted social development everywhere as evolving through different stages, and it was historically imperative for every society to move to a higher stage of social evolution or perish. He classified the modern West as lying in the highest stage of social evolution and China as being in an outdated patriarchal stage. Through such classification, he represented the modern West as the symbol of modernity and the apogee of the evolutionary potential of humanity.

Yan Fu's introduction of the ideas of evolution and progress had a profound influence on modern Chinese thought. Following Yen Fu's propagation of evolutionary theories, the idea of universal, progressive evolution captured the best minds of modern China. Before the First World War, the historical trend was generally understood to be represented by the Western democracies. After the outbreak of the First World War, however, a consensus emerged among Chinese intellectual elites about the decay of modern Western civilization. While Yan Fu and some veteran reformers wanted to reconsider Confucianism to find answers for China's future, the majority of intellectuals were ready to continue to seek a realization of the ideal society. The Soviet Union immediately replaced the Western model as the apogee of the evolutionary potential of mankind. In this sense, Yan Fu's introduction of Western evolutionism paved the way for the spread of Marxism in China.



Against the Spector of Time: Critique of Progressivism in Modern China

Axel Schneider (University of Göttingen)

Recent changes in the Chinese intellectual landscape ranging from the critique of radicalism, to *Farewell to Revolution* and New National Studies during the 1990s down to the apparent revival of religion during the 2000s have triggered a renewed interest in the Chinese reception of modern views of evolutionary or progressive history and concomitant notions of change and agency.

However, in spite of the strong interest in Chinese tradition and its potential role in shaping an alternative Chinese modernity, very little attention has been paid to Chinese critique of modern views of history and how this critique was linked to specific philosophical and political positions and strategies.

This lacunae is all the more astonishing as many scholars have argued that modern views of history and forms of writing history in the Christian, Islamic and Buddhist context have been deeply shaped by their respective religious traditions. An inquiry into the nature of Chinese critiques of modern view of history, especially those types of critique that rely on Chinese traditional views of time and change, can be very enlightening on this question of the influence of pre-modern religious traditions on modern progressive views of history.

Against the background of the reception of modern evolutionary and progressive views of history (which for a long time have not been differentiated in modern China), I argue in this article that roughly three types of critique have to be distinguished.

1. A critique motivated by the insight into the negative consequences of modern progressivist views of history subordinating all nations to universal laws of development thus negating or ignoring issues of national or cultural particularity. Strictly speaking, this type of critique is not a critique of progressivism per se, but only of progressivism insofar as it posits universal patterns of development. This critique thus does not amount to a fundamental questioning of progress and



modernity. The CCP’s emphasis on Socialism with Chinese characteristics is a good example of this type.

2. A second type of critique starts out from the observation that in many fields of human activity we can not observe progress, in fact more often than not the opposite is the case. This is particularly prominent in the field of morality. The concept of progressive history, as much as it can be observed e.g. in technology, is not an adequate theory of history. This type of critique has been put forward e.g. by Du Yaquan, Liang Qichao in his later years and Liu Yizheng during the early 1920s, just to mention a few examples.
3. A third type of critique is as the second one motivated by ethical concerns. However, this position does not proceed from a historical-factual observation of non-progress, but is a rather systematic critique of evolutionism arguing that a view of change based on competition and strength can not be the basis for a good society and therefore has to be rejected on moral, not on factual grounds. Some members of the Critical Review Group have argued in that manner as e.g. as Jing Changji from a Buddhist perspective of compassion or Liu Yizheng from a Confucian perspective.
4. The last and, from a Western perspective, most interesting type of critique amounts to a critique in nuce not just of progressive history, but of modernity as such. A prominent example is Zhang Taiyan’s Buddhist inspired critique of progressive history and concomitant notions of subjectivity and agency that ever since Descartes’ famous dictum *cogito ergo sum* form the core of the modern project.

Summing up, I come to the conclusion that although most of these thinkers and the positions they formulated were marginal at their time, their critique amply shows the systematic link between the modern project and views of progressive history and how this link has led some of the critical scholars to challenge fundamentally the modern project. In quite different ways their critiques attempt to reconceptualize agency and subjectivity in ways that would be less alienating.



Fantasizing Science: *Kexue xiaoshuo* 科學小說 in Early Twentieth-Century China (1902-1920)

Rui Kunze (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

When Liang Qichao (1873-1929) promoted “new fiction” (*xin xiaoshuo*) at the turn of the twentieth century, he intended to turn the popular literary form *xiaoshuo* into a means of reforming the nation and its people. “New fiction” therefore emerged as a part of the crisis response strategies to transform the collapsing empire into a modern nation-state under the pressure of expanding colonialism of Western powers and Japan. Chinese science fiction finds its modern origin in one narrative type of “new fiction” – *kexue xiaoshuo* (*kex*) – which, in Liang's imagination, should carry the didactic function of “borrowing [the form of] fiction to explain ... science.”

As a part of “new fiction,” *kex* was viewed by intellectual and political elites at the time as an instrument to realize their dream of enlightening the populace. Thus *kex* suffered an unnatural literary birth, because its theory appeared before any literary practice was done and its generic prestige was established before there were enough works could justify it. Most indigenous creations of *kex* were published in the short period between 1902 and 1920. Late Qing *kex* texts were mainly written by intellectual elites circulating the ideas of science (anti-superstition), the nation-state, and racial/social evolution in the fantastic form of storytelling. Early Republican China saw different trends of *kex*. On the one hand, *kex* texts published in the *Ladies' Journal* (*Funü zazhi*, 1915-31) integrate “science” into the molding of “new women,” whose mastering of scientific home management, combined with their social domestication, makes them effective building blocks of a modern China. On the other hand, entertainment *kex* texts display the ideological recalcitrance of popular literature, which, in catering to the curiosity and fantasy of its urban readers, deviate from the discourses of nation-building and social evolution by imagining Western cities – the most favorite one London – as the epicenter of science, where “the mad scientist” inhabits.



Prospect Optimism and the Temptations of Expertocracy in Republican China

Thomas Fröhlich (IKGF, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

Intellectuals and politicians across the political spectrum of Republican China expressed highly optimistic expectations that China, facing a severe national crisis, would be able to catch up with allegedly more advanced nation states by implementing a concerted, target-oriented effort of comprehensive modernization. In this paper such expectations shall be analyzed by retracing their formation in intellectual history, by identifying different representations of such optimism (focusing on Sun Yat-sen, Hu Shi, Ding Wenjiang), and by exploring its implications in terms of inherent temporal-spatial notions of (world) history and progress as well as ideological claims to install a new type of expertocratic “politics”.

It shall be argued that in the context of fast-paced and comprehensive social, political, scientific-technological and ideological change, prospect-optimistic visions of a manageable type of historical progress provided Chinese thinkers with normative orientation in conceptualizing social and political transformation while compensating for the dwindling relevance of traditional social and intellectual orders, practices and values. Prospect optimism, and in particular its expertocratic form, offered an ideologically attractive image of nation-based human collectivities that consciously produce the modernization of their society within the linear, progressive time of world history. In a crucial turn, Chinese proponents of prospect-optimistic thought inscribed notions of the noncontemporaneity of civilizational progress into the historical time-frame of universal progress, hence envisioning the co-existence of past, present and future stages of progress in the contemporary world.

This conceptual foil was essential to various highly controversial claims to identify the causes of China’s “national crisis” – a crisis that was explicitly or implicitly defined as the effect of a protracted and/or misguided implementation of progress by a “Chinese” collectivity (the nation, the people, the elites etc.). Against this backdrop, the prospect optimistic type of crisis diagnostics conceptualized the national crisis itself as a historical trigger of civilizational progress. The crisis discourses which pervaded the intellectual history of late 19th-century and Republican China were thus imbued with notions of civilizational progress that simultaneously posited the manageability and the noncontemporaneity of progress. On this conceptual basis a great variety of crisis diagnostics which were characterized by a conflation with prognostications about the future course of China’s progress emerged. Such



prognostications entailed optimistic claims to the predictability of history which in turn comprised ideological tendencies to conceptually minimize historical contingency by “rationalizing” history as a totality of intellectually discernible causes and effects. Given this conceptual strategy, Chinese thinkers from a broad range of ideological convictions like Sun Yat-sen, Hu Shi and Ding Wenjiang tended to conceptualize “politics” – in fact the field of “politics” as such – according to the rationale of eliminating its unpredictable, “irrational” elements. They hence resorted to projections of conquering “politics” in theory and practice by rationally accountable types of expertise.



The Contingency of Culture: Westernization and Cultural Construction in the 1930s

Leigh Jenco (London School of Economics and Political Science)

Since the 1860s, Chinese thinkers have repeatedly sought national salvation in the transformation of culture (*wenhua*). These arguments reached their culmination in the 1930s as intellectuals debated the possibility and direction of “cultural construction.” Prompted by Chiang Kai-Shek’s so-called “New Life Movement” and related projects for “National Construction,” as well as cultural and educational reforms of the May Fourth period (1915-1927), these debates also echo China’s 1898 reform movement in explicitly articulating the whole of Chinese culture as a target of deliberate political remaking. Key intellectuals such as Chen Xujing and Hu Shi urged “totalistic Westernization” to counter influential calls by Wang Xinming and others for “cultural construction on a Chinese base.” The paper does not arbitrate between these views, so much as examine the methods by which these Chinese thinkers hope to borrow from alien cultural forms. How does culture come to be seen by both camps as an object of transformation and site of salvation? What kinds of interpretive methods render culture tractable to borrowing, imitation, and construction? The answer to these questions, I argue, lies not only in a historical reconstruction of their work but also in exploring the theoretical credibility of their cultural view. That is, the optimistic reliance on culture to secure total social renewal is grounded at least in part on a compelling and novel assumption about culture as a product of our deliberate present choices, rather than an effluence of our past heritage.



Science and Religion between Optimism and Skepticism: Minakata Kumagusu in Japan and Hu Shi in China

Takahiro Nakajima 中島隆博 (University of Tokyo)

In the debate on science and *xuanxue*, Hu Shi took a pro-science position by criticizing Chinese traditional religious or metaphysical thoughts. However, he did not seem to accept modern western science which represents “progress” unconditionally. He had a kind of “skepticism” towards western modern science, because he believed that there must be some religious dimension that supports it. Hu Shi then tried to constitute new modern religion in China. Without this religion, it becomes difficult for Chinese people to follow science and “progress.” However, how can Chinese create this new religion by separating it from Chinese traditional religious or metaphysical thoughts? This is one of the most difficult points not only in Hu Shi’s thought, but also in every thought of East Asian intellectuals. In order to shed light to this difficulty, I would like to refer to Minakata Kumagusu, a Japanese modern thinker and naturalist. As a naturalist, he spent his youth in British Museum and wrote many articles to the *Nature*. Following modern western science, Kumagusu gradually became skeptic to it. After coming back to Japan, he retired from the academia and lived in his hometown, Wakayama prefecture, where he found again a traditional religious dimension. Nonetheless, he did not take an anti-science position. He tried to merge modern western science and traditional Japanese religion in a new form. In this respect, Kumagusu promoted “ecological” movement for the first time in Japan. It is interesting enough that Kumagusu and Hu Shi seem to be opposite sides of the same coin. When both of them followed modern western science with some skepticism, Hu Shi as a person in the public sphere of politics and academia tried to constitute new religion that was different from traditional one, while Kumagusu as a person retiring from the public sphere tried to organize “ecological” praxis based upon traditional religion. I would like to discuss the meanings of their reactions to modern western science by reconsidering the meanings of religion in modern East Asia.



When Revolutionary Optimism Encountered Local Particularity: The 1947-49 Literary and Cultural Debate in Post-Colonial Taiwan

A-chin Hsiau 蕭阿勤 (Academia Sinica)

In post-May Fourth China, the radical approach to this country’s socio-political problems inspired by Soviet Russia increasingly superseded the reformist and pragmatic model of Western liberal democracies. This intellectual and political change had a major influence on the development of Chinese literature. Since the late 1920s, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was ruthlessly suppressed by the Kuomintang-led government of Republic of China (ROC), the Communists had been rising in cultural circles. Beginning with the creation of the League of Chinese Left-wing Writers (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng*) in Shanghai in 1930, the leftist camp dominated literary circles during the ensuing decade.

In 1945, when Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan ended, the KMT government took it over and declared it a province of the ROC. The ensuing misgovernment, including a radical “de-Japanization” policy, caused the tension between local Taiwanese and new-arriving Mainlanders. To “re-Chinaize” Taiwan, the provincial government institutionalized a rigid monolingualism which privileged Mandarin. For Taiwanese intellectuals who were used to Japanese information, the impact of this policy was devastating and thus Taiwanese writers were increasingly excluded from literary circles. The local Taiwanese-Mainlander tension was only compounded after the 2-28 Incident of 1947, an island-wide Taiwanese resistance, was suppressed. Soon after the Incident a heated debate about Taiwanese literature and culture took place between a group of left-leaning Mainlander intellectuals and members of the Taiwanese cultural elite. It raged on nearly two years and ended eight months before the KMT government relocated itself to Taiwan in late 1949 because of losing the civil war to the CCP. The Mainlander cultural intellectuals showed a keen interest in reviving local literary circles as a gesture of goodwill toward Taiwanese writers. Motivated by a strong revolutionary optimism imbued with nationalist underpinnings, these enthusiastic followers of the literary ideology of social realism prevailing in 1930s China eagerly promoted a return of Taiwan as a “literary desert” or “artistic virgin territory” contaminated by colonial poisons to the Chinese national family of literature and culture. “The people,” “revolution,” “progress,” “liberation,” “anti-feudalism,” “anti-imperialism” and the like were their catchphrases. Yet their goodwill and enthusiasm based on revolutionary optimism were



challenged by Taiwanese writers who demanded the recognition of the particularity of Taiwanese culture and literature which included colonial legacies.

The purpose of my paper is to examine the dynamics of the 1947-49 debate, with focus of analysis on the nature of revolutionary optimism that the left-leaning Mainlander intellectuals embraced. Especially the paper investigates, in a local, post-colonial social context, the limitations and drawbacks of the revolutionary optimism informed by nationalism which typifies modern China, aiming to show that arguably, nowhere can they be better observed than in its encountering with local particularity.



Talking about Science and Technology in Late Imperial and Early Republican China

Iwo Amelung (University of Frankfurt)

In this paper, I will at first analyze, how Chinese scholars and intellectuals conceptualized science and technology during the very last years of Imperial China. I will show that we are dealing with a multilayered and at times rather contradicting discourse. While there was a considerable number of scholars highlighting the “Chinese quality” of science and technology within the framework of the theory of the “Chinese origins of the Western sciences” many others wrote about science and technology as an indicator of progress and modernity by referring to almost exclusively Western and Japanese examples and even went so far to deny the existence of any scientific tradition in China. In the second part of the paper I want to show, how during the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century these two popular discourses merged and how similar to the Indian case described by Chakraborty and others „scientific progress became the great denominator of nationhood“.



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