

Modernisms' Chinas: Introduction

Who owns “modernism”? And who owns “China”? Or rather, to put it in terms more appropriate for our current thinking: what are the terms of their intertwined and mutual *belonging*?

The phrase is conventionally written, “China’s modernism,” or “Chinese modernism,” where the possessive or adjectival relationship presumes a thing called “modernism” that develops into a particular type in the Chinese context. Scholarship on Chinese modernism tends therefore insistently to arrange its objects in relation to an oscillation between origin and difference: what is modernism (in a European context) and what in China corresponds to it or derives from it? Scholarship on Chinese modernism thus tends towards the production of an initial similarity (there is such a thing as modernism in the Chinese context) before generating a local difference (and Chinese modernism is not the same as other modernisms in ways X, Y, and Z). The belonging of modernism to China thus proceeds along the axis of resemblance; China’s claim to modernism relies on the production of differences inside a general field of similarity.

I am not the first to point out that the field of similarity in which such belonging operates has as its structural origin a culturally and geographically particular history. To think of Chinese modernism in such a way is already to be caught up in what Rey Chow (2006: 83) has called “a mimetic desire, responsive and oriented toward the West’s imposition of itself on the Rest.” The project of such a mimesis is to assert comparability with the West on the basis of having some version of what the West has—hence, the need

¹ The slogan comes from a television advertising campaign, whose commercials ran extensively during the 1998 World Cup, for “Feichang Cola, China’s own cola.” The fact that the cola no longer seems to be sold indicates, perhaps, the arrival of the nationalist discourse at a certain uncommodifiable limit.

² See his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1969: 1–31; 37–40); see also Piroette (2005: 84, my translation), who writes that for Kojève, “Desire for desire, in its very structure, expresses itself only as *desire for the desire of an Other* who one seeks to recognize, and whose recognition one seeks.”

to assert the existence of a coeval tradition of Chinese (or Japanese, or Indian) philosophy, or literary criticism, or even soft drinks (非常可乐; 中国自己的可乐!), as though Chinese writing, thought, or beverages could only be respected in terms that declared their equivalence to the West’s most prominent cultural forms (which range of course from philosophy to Coca-Cola).¹

It is, of course, not the case that China has no “philosophy,” no “literary criticism,” or no “aesthetic,” but rather that the mimetic production of these categories in the Chinese context aims to fill a lack that does not “belong” to China proper. I emphasize: it is the lack that does not belong to China, not the category that might be thought of as “lacking.” Such a “lack” belongs, rather, to the international context in which one’s perception of self operates necessarily through reference to the eyes of an other. As Naoki Sakai puts it, “our desire to know what we have supposedly known in our own language . . . arrives by way of our desire for the figure of a foreign language”; that is, the desire to determine what “we” know proceeds always in relation to the desire to translate that knowledge into terms that will matter elsewhere, as though the coin of recognition and merit were most visible only when translated into a foreign currency (Sakai 1997: 59; in Chow 2006: 84). The implied genitive of phrases like “Japanese philosophy” (Sakai’s example) or “Chinese modernism” marks, then, simultaneously a claim of possession (China can have its *own* modernism) and the fact of being possessed by a desire for recognition.

Alexandre Kojève, rewriting Hegel, makes the desire for recognition by an other the fundamental feature of a history peopled by properly *human* beings.² There is nothing wrong with that desire, even or especially when it crosses national boundaries. Indeed, the world might be a better place if more people in the United States were willing to acknowledge and even desire the other’s recognition in a less murderous form: the desire for the other’s recognition is the beginning of social life. The problem is not, therefore, that we yearn to think ourselves with reference to the

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other's recognition, but rather that inequities in the relative distribution of knowledge-through-the-other's-recognition, themselves factors of economic and military power, have unbalanced the field of scholarly advance and of intellectual play. So you get questions about whether there can be Chinese modernism, or an African "nation," while in the European context the internal divergences and difficulties of categories like "modernism" and "nation" fail to raise even the possibility of *geographic* incompatibility. What about England and Englishness, for instance, makes it impossible for English modernism to ever acquire the universal purity of which it dreams? Where is the suggestion that modernism itself (wherever it arises) is the product of a "desire to know what we have supposedly known in our own language," arriving "by way of our desire for the figure of a foreign language"?

It is here, in this special issue of *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*. As I have suggested, the intertwined relationship between China and modernism, itself the product of an obscure and fateful agon of desire, self-knowledge and mimetic force, has pointed in two directions all along. That doubleness receives a clarifying estrangement in the issue's title. It would have been easier to say "Chinese modernisms"; but plurals do not stand in well for oscillations. The genitive swerve of "modernisms' Chinas" is meant, rather, to highlight a doubled and doubling regard. It should also remind us that modernism, however loosely one defines it, has in a variety of places and occasions produced itself in relation to a foundational idea of China.

In order to paint as complete a picture as possible of *that* relationship, in which certain well-known forms of modernist thought or work took China as the national or cultural ground for their aesthetic labor, the essays in this issue treat the question of modernisms' Chinas from a number of national locations. The point is that at a number of crucial moments, modernism has made China its own, has engaged in exactly the same play of possession and desire for recognition that characterizes a phrase like

“Chinese modernism.” At the many sites of its production, modernism turns out not only to desire the figure of a foreign language, but to become one. The ongoing project of pointing this out will one fine day force all scholars of modernism, and not just those working outside Western Europe and the United States, to think of their modernisms as both nationally particular and internationally structured. Then, “modernism” will be a general phrase for the way an aesthetic mode relates to a number of broader conditions, just as the phrase “modernity” has in recent years become an umbrella term for a variety of possible “modernities” that share the fact of having a relation to certain geopolitical and economic conditions, without for all that sharing a particular relation as such.³

³ See for instance S.N. Eisenstadt (2000: 2, 3), who argues that “the best way to understand the contemporary world—indeed to explain the history of modernity—is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs” in which a variety of competing “modernities” for which “Western patterns of modernity” are not an ontological *origin* but merely a historically determined “basic reference point.” Along these lines one might think of “modernism” not as any particular formation but rather, adopting the terminology Björn Wittrock (2000: 55) adopts with reference to modernity, as a set of “promissory notes . . . that entail some minimal conditions of adequacy that may be demanded of macrosocietal institutions [or in this case, aesthetic works] no matter how much these institutions [works] may differ in other respects.” The essays by Wittrock and Eisenstadt both appear in a special issue of *Daedalus* devoted to “Multiple Modernities,” most of which approach the question of multiplicity from a historical or sociological point of view. For a more philosophical take, see Prakash 1999.

The essays in this issue attempt to sketch out some of the ways in which modernism has operated as a relation to China. The national origins they cover include the Soviet Union, England, Japan, and China. This last inclusion may seem unusual; surely the Chinese modernism referred to are not as imaginary, not as caught up in the “desire for the figure of a foreign language,” as those elsewhere. But the fact of Chinese national identity is an inescapable feature of the self-conscious development of Chinese modernist style, so that one might say that in the case of Chinese modernism in particular, the Chineseness of the aesthetic mode (modernism) turns out to depend heavily on the Chineseness of the nation (China) to which the mode hopes to contribute; yet another instance of the snake swallowing its tail. The lesson is that the work of literary scholarship, even in a single national context, requires an attention to the transnational contexts and flows that shape and define the relationship between literature and nation, especially when the categories of “literature” and “nation” emerge as counterpoints to a previously understood network of empires and vassal states (so that the arrival of the categories “literature” and “nation” in China does not happen in a vacuum, but in a context in which literature operates as one potential engine of the transformation from “ancient” empire to “modern” nation). For these reasons, there is no such thing

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as a simple “national” literature; likewise there is no authentic political formation called (in English) “China” to which Chinese literature uniquely refers, even as various confused and misguided foreigners spin out illusory and fantastical Chinas for their own use. Nations are, as Benedict Anderson (1983) suggests, imaginary communities, products of representational work, even from the inside.

The essays follow. Rather than present extensive summaries, let me simply differentiate the work they do from the larger field of comparative literature from which they may seem to stem: what might be called “China-in-the-Western-imagination Studies.” I have nothing against that project—in fact the phrase describes my work quite well—but its danger is that, repeated often enough, it can lead to the assumption that the cultural traffic of the imagination only operates in one direction. Xiaomei Chen has done much (in her book *Occidentalism* [1995]) to confound that belief; here her focus on the development of Tian Han’s career shows how any single life will be moved differently at different times by shifting configurations of the relation between local and global culture. Shi Yaohua’s essay offers a similar recognition in the much-ignored field of Chinese modernist architecture. And lest we forget that China is only a part of the “East,” or that the “West” is made up of multiple and competing sites of interest, knowledge, and historical change, Haun Saussy (thinking of Moscow) and Bert Winther-Tamaki (thinking of Tokyo and Beijing) are there to remind us that the boundaries that trace those two great habits of geographic thought, East and West, are themselves sites of conflict and the objects of representational and political transformation. My own essay, responding to this last insight, tells the story of a failed meeting and proposes a new model for scholarship in Anglo-American modernist studies.

I would like to thank Judith Green, whose 2004 conference on Orientalism and Modernism at King’s College, Cambridge (supported by the British Academy), gave a number of scholars from the United States,

Europe, and China the opportunity to work through these issues at length. Some of that work appears in this issue. Insofar as the essays you see here are the products of that encounter, and thus of the vagaries of international knowledge production, the travel of people and ideas, and their intersection at what was, for most of us, an unfamiliar and defamiliarizing location, they mirror in some ways the trajectories of modernism itself. Their belongings remain to be determined.

Eric Hayot / Los Angeles / June 2006

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