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Early Modern China - A Preliminary Postmortem


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“Early Modern China”
A Preliminary Postmortem

Søren Clausen

How do we best conceptualise the historical trajectory of Chinese society since the fifteenth century – as ‘late imperial China’ or perhaps as ‘Early Modern’ China, analogous in important respects to contemporary early modern Europe? This paper examines a number of studies related to the latter approach and discusses the validity of the approach.

China in World History

A world that is increasingly becoming ‘one world’ needs a world history. Since World War Two the search for a history of the world that transcends the parochialism of national histories has been on the historiographical agenda. From the time of its establishment in 1947, UNESCO put its resources into a world history project the purpose of which was to show the contributions of all civilisations to the making of the contemporary world rather than just focusing on the trajectory of European civilisation. An academic journal was launched, and the first volume of UNESCO’s History of Mankind appeared in 1963. At the University of Chicago, William McNeill (1917-) emerged during the 1950s and 1960s as the frontrunner of a new generation of world historians, and Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) and the Annales historians in Europe headed in the same direction with the new catchword histoire globale. More recently, and particularly in the 1990s, world history has been one of the fastest growing industries of historiography. The World History Association was established in 1982, and in 1990 the association newsletter was turned into

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1 This paper benefited from discussions at the conference on World History at the Turn of the Millennium held at the University of Aarhus, September 23, 1999, as well as the Venice workshop of the Center for Cultural Research, February 2000.
a regular academic journal. A large number of monographs and collective works on world history have appeared in recent years.

But challenges to the enterprise of writing world history remain formidable. As demonstrated by *The History of Mankind*, the mere piecing together of politically acceptable “contributions” of various civilisations does not constitute an integrated world history. Current standard textbooks of world history do not attempt global integration except for the modern period; rather, the history of countries, regions and civilisations are presented on separate tracks.2

Writing Asian and more specifically Chinese history into world history is a particularly thorny issue, and the historiographical field is highly divided. In contemporary world history books, Chinese history is given more space than in earlier works,3 but essentially it remains an adjunct to the main storyline. This challenge has been well expressed by two prominent historians who have devoted more effort than anyone else to the integration of Asian history with world history: Ainslie T. Embree and Carol Gluck. In the preface to their edited volume *Asia in Western and World History* (1997) they describe the difficulties they encountered in their work:

“The wide open spaces of world history ought to have been easier … to ‘infiltrate’ with Asian history recounted on its own terms. But it did not turn out so here ... This takeover of the narrative line sometimes made world history seem like western history writ global. As a result, we often found ourselves ‘adding Asia’ to the main story, without necessarily getting inside the action and changing the categories themselves...”4

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3 In the latest and fifth edition of McKay et al. (1999) a few extra pages on Asian history have been added as compared to the fourth edition (1996).
What does “getting inside the action” mean in the case of Chinese history? It is the current expression of a centuries-old issue: what happens when the categories of European historiography, determined by the European experience, are applied to China? In the last few decades a number of “revisionist” historiographical strategies for conceptualising Chinese history have been proposed. The purpose of this paper is to examine the validity and implications of the strategy that is associated with the term “Early Modern China”. Since the early 1980s a number of historiographical books and articles on the late Chinese dynasties Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) have suggested substituting this term for the conventional term “late imperial China”. The idea has not been broadly accepted, however, in the scholarly world. “Early Modern China” has drawn a lot of fire from many China historians, and the historiographical debates surrounding the issue of “Early Modern China” have been among the most exciting in the field of Chinese history during the 1990s.

The implications of the two main contending terminologies are obviously significant. “Late imperial China” is usually defined as the period from 1400 to 1850, i.e. from early Ming to the decline of the Qing. It seems to be associated with a world view that essentially sees China as external to the main course of world history, a civilisation locked up in her ancient institutions, incapable of generating modernising features of economy and society. These implications are clearly unsatisfactory today, and are growing more so all the time, as our knowledge of the remarkable dynamism of the period in question grows. The old image of a stagnant Chinese society during the latest two dynasties has been refuted by scholars for several decades, and this refutation has long since been accepted by the broader circles of history writing in the West. “Late imperial China” therefore seems like a natural target of the ongoing effort, particularly in American historiography, to “roll back” so-called Eurocentrism from historiography and history teaching. The emotional dimension of the issue is highlighted by the Indian scholar Sanjay Subrahmanyam in a recent essay: “Having taken away so much from the societies of South Asia, it seems to be high time that social science at least

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gave them back what they had by the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries –
their admittedly very ambiguous ‘early modernity’.”

“Late imperial China” makes us think in terms of difference, while the
alternative formula “Early Modern China” is inclusive; it opens up new
vistas of comparison by focusing more on the global perspective. My aim
here is to inspect the most prominent examples of the historiographical
literature of the 1980s and 1990s that employs the “Early Modern China”
approach. The examination of these cases will show that there are in fact a
number of distinct approaches associated with the concept, with rather
different implications. It will be also be argued that the approach never
gained a cumulative momentum and seems to be fading towards the end of
the 1990s, but that it remains a valid expression of a historiographical
problematique that won’t go away: the continuing difficulties of fitting the
Chinese historical experience into a larger history of the world. Before
starting I should make clear that discussion and questioning of the
historiographical strategies applied in a number of recent historical works
on China is in no way meant to diminish the significance or value of those
works. We are in fact dealing with some of the finest scholarship in the
field, including the work of William Rowe, Susan Naquin, Evelyn Rawski,
and Craig Clunas. Regardless of approach, the literature examined here
remains first-class contemporary scholarship in the field of Chinese
history.

First a note on “Early Modern” in the European Context: “Early Modern
Europe” was first proposed in the early nineteenth century, as historians
inspired by romaniticism began to challenge the universalism of
Enlightenment philosophy. “Early Modern Europe” was put forward as a
way of drawing a line of demarcation to the “Middle Ages” while at the
same time creating a “stage” where the modern world could gradually
come into existence. Various periodisations have been proposed, ranging
from 1400-1700 to 1500-1780, the latter being the standard interpretation
today. “Early Modern Europe” has gained a new impetus in recent
decades. But the gradual “rehabilitation” of the Middle Ages pushes for a

6 Sanjay Subrahmanyam: “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South
revision of the paradigm from one side, and from the other side the ongoing “deconstruction” of the Industrial Revolution blurs the line demarcating the truly modern age.\(^8\)

What we try to express with the term “Early Modern Europe” is a syndrome of change and transformation that brought Europe to the threshold of the modern age. It involves a large number of processes – linked to each other in complex ways – such as long-term demographic growth since 1500; the renewed expansion of agriculture, but also strong urbanisation; the growing importance of long-distance trade and a general orientation towards the market; technical innovation and dissemination; overseas emigration and the expansion of world commerce; new financial institutions to serve emerging capitalism; growing intervention of governments in order to promote the commercial economy; “absentee landlordism”; a growing resistance to the status oriented social order; a fascination with mechanical engineering; and a host of other things. The point made by those China scholars who seek to apply the “early modern” syndrome to the Chinese historical material is essentially the recognition that Chinas has experienced many similar processes in the same period; and maybe even other processes related to “early modernity” that legitimately qualify as Chinese variations on the theme. Drawing China into the community of the “early modern world” signals a willingness to see China as a legitimate and full-blown member of the modern world.

“Early Modern China” in scholarship on Chinese history

The concept of “Early Modern China” (henceforth: EMC) has been in use for several decades to designate the period from 1840 to 1911; or from 1895 to 1911, that is, taking the Opium War, or the Sino-Japanese War of

\(^8\) Eg. Albert Feuerwerker: “… Western scholarship has increasingly ‘deconstructed’ (one might perhaps say) the concept of an industrial revolution itself, showing that landmark in our textbooks to have been both more drawn out in time and more enigmatic in its origins than conventional accounts allowed” (Albert Feuerwerker: “Presidential Address: Questions About China’s Early Modern Economic History That I Wish I Could Answer”, \textit{The Journal of Asian Studies}, vol. 51, no. 4, Nov. 1992 [pp. 757-769]: 758).
1894-95, as the defining event in the introduction/intrusion of the modern world into China; and the fall of the last dynasty in 1911 as the obvious subdivision. During the 1980s and 1990s a number of important studies have endeavoured to challenge the conventional assumption about China’s pre-Opium War lack of links with, or internal dynamics similar to, Europe and the world, by means of a redefined concept of EMC. It came to mean a much earlier period; according to some accounts starting from the late Ming (1550–1644) or even earlier, in other studies mainly associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (High to Late Qing). The common denominator of the studies to be discussed below is the explicit or implicit use of the EMC concept in a context where it is argued that China in the period 1500–1850, or during specific periods within this time span, experienced economic, social or cultural processes that to some extent parallel those of Europe in the same period. Most of the studies focus on internally generated dynamics, or a combination of internal and external forces, particularly China’s inclusion in an emerging world trading system 1500–1800 which in itself signaled China’s introduction into “the early modern world”. One particular study focuses exclusively on the latter.


Paul Ropp’s study of the famous Qing novel *The Scholars* [Rulin Waishi] by Wu Jingzi was the first to introduce the new, “revisionist” EMC concept. *The Scholars* is in part satire, critical of the hypocrisy and formalism associated with the all-important examination system (with Wu Jingzi’s own failure at the hands of this system as the source of energy fuelling his writing); it also exposes larger social ills such as superstition and suppression of women. In the Introduction Ropp writes that “[A]lthough Wu Ching-tzu [Wu Jingzi] lived in a society far different from our own and died over two hundred years ago, many aspects of his life and thought seem strikingly modern…” 9 This “seeming modernity” is the starting-point for Ropp’s analysis, which seeks to elucidate the

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“complex problem of the relationship between political, social, and
economic change on one hand, and intellectual change on the other.”
Ropp analyses *The Scholars* as the expression of the emerging new social
formation in the eighteenth century which he coins “Early Modern China”.
Here are a number of keywords related to social and economic
development:
- “The term *premodern* … is misleading because it implies that only two
possible types of economies — modern industrial and premodern
agricultural. In fact, China’s economy in the eighteenth century was
classified by rather rapid growth, increasing diversification in
agriculture, expanding interregional trade and handicraft production, and at
least a modest degree of urbanization.”
- “The most vivid evidence of economic change in early Ch’ing [Qing]
China was a dramatic population explosion which predated Europe’s
modern population growth by nearly a century….”
- “China’s level of interregional commerce … was … extremely
impressive by contrast with levels of trade in eighteenth century
Europe…”
- “… the early Ch’ing as the formative period of modern merchant and
craft guild formation in China…”

Further attention is devoted to describing the “blurring of class lines in
the Ming-Ch’ing era”, with wealth increasingly becoming the important
determinant of elite status. Ropp speculates that “… The rise of the
merchant class in China in Ming-Ch’ing times did not lead to a bourgeois-
capitalist revolution, but it might be said to have led, at least in some
respects, to a bourgeoisification of Chinese elite culture.”

Thus the foundation has been established for suggesting the social
basis of new literary trends: “… an identifiable urban-based, more or less
prosperous, literate but sub-official and subelite class of merchants,  

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artisans, entertainers, and unemployed or underemployed scholars.”\textsuperscript{17}

Further, “… it was also from this middle ambivalent social stratum that cultural creativity most clearly flourished in the Ming-Ch’ing period.”\textsuperscript{18} - “… Wu’s fiction, which represented a trend in the eighteenth century, was different from most previous Chinese fiction in its naturalistic presentation of a world purged of moral retribution or supernatural phenomena as meaningful explanations of reality. This striking secularizing trend in literature would appear, as in the West at the same time, to be a natural outgrowth in response to an increasingly prosperous and urbanized society.”\textsuperscript{19}

Paul Ropp concludes his study of \textit{The Scholars} with a general statement about the correspondence between social and cultural change: “… some comparable social and economic changes in China and the West set the stage for comparable artistic responses, namely, extended prose fiction or the novel.”\textsuperscript{20} This was the opening statement of the EMC historiographical strategy. Ropp’s views on the volume of economic and social change in the eighteenth century have been proven true by later work in the field, but his approach to literary analysis appears more connected to an academic discourse that was waning by the 1980s.

Jonathan Porter: “The Scientific Community in Early Modern China” (1982)\textsuperscript{21}

EMC made its next appearance in 1982 in \textit{ISIS}, a journal on the history of science. Jonathan Porter’s starting-point is the argument that “[s]uperficially, at least, the paths taken by scientific development in Europe and China were not far apart. The emergence of modern science in Europe in the seventeenth century followed the gradual recovery after the fifteenth century of the neglected Greek scientific tradition, in a period of intellectual and social ferment. Similarly Chinese science experienced a

\textsuperscript{17} Ropp 1981, p. 49.
\textsuperscript{18} Ropp 1981, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{19} Ropp 1981, p. 233.
\textsuperscript{20} Ropp 1981, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{21} Porter, Jonathan: “The Scientific Community in Early Modern China”, \textit{ISIS}, vol. 73, no. 269: 529-544.
renaisance in the seventeenth century…” EMC thus presents itself as a vehicle for establishing comparison on equal ground.

Porter’s examination of “early modern” Chinese science is based on a study of the late eighteenth–century text by Ruan Yuan “Biographies of Mathematical Scientists” [Chourenzhuan] and its later supplements.Echoing a theory earlier proposed by no less than the Kangxi Emperor (reigned 1662-1721), Ruan Yuan assumed that Western science had an ancient Chinese origin, so that “Chinese and Western [science], while nominally different, are essentially the same.” Porter’s analysis of the relationships between Chinese mathematicians in the Qing dynasty shows that “… although scientific activity in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China had not yet become a unified enterprise any more than it had in Europe at the same time, the compilation of the Ch’ou-ji chuan [Chourenzhuan] suggests that such a conception was emerging by the end of the eighteenth century.” Institutionally, modern science in China and Europe developed on parallel tracks, although there were also significant differences. Porter’s conclusion therefore sums up the similarities and differences in these terms:
- “By the late seventeenth century scientific activity in China evinced many characteristics of a continuous and systematic social activity. In several respects the social structure of science was not unlike that in Europe during a comparable stage of the Scientific Revolution. The value of science – particularly mathematics and astronomy – was increasingly appreciated… With the differentiation of scientific from humanistic knowledge, practitioners of the mathematical sciences now increasingly perceived them as a distinct and autonomous activity based on independent and objective criteria of validity.”
- “Unlike Europe, science in China did not achieve the momentum of a radical social and intellectual movement within the larger social system.”

23 Porter 1982, p. 532. (This is an early version of the gu yi you zhi [“We already had this in antiquity”] argument that flourished in Chinese intellectual circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.)
Why not? Porter suggests that it might have something to do with a changing Zeitgeist in Qing China: “The controversy that accompanied the transition from the Ming to the Ch’ing [Qing] had been a fertile source of intellectual alternatives and stimulation… When by the early eighteenth century this mood of intellectual uncertainty faded in the light of the successful Ch’ing [Qing] political and social unification, scientific activity was well on its way to becoming institutionalized, but it was no longer infused with the energy of a radical movement.”

Porter’s notion of uncertainty as the generator of creativity is similar to Ropp’s argument as discussed above. But was the early Qing particularly intellectually fertile? Interestingly, in Ropp’s study it was the late Ming that deserved this characterisation, whereas “… the conservative reaction that followed the Ch’ing [Qing] conquest reversed the relative liberalism and lively ferment of the late Ming era…” Porter’s idea that “a promising early show” for Chinese science (if that is what it was) later faded due to social and political stabilisation seems to have a weak foundation. But it eloquently demonstrates the essential argument that is implicit in most of the EMC literature: China experienced the beginnings of modernity in the period around the Ming-Qing transition, but the promising start was later cut short due to internal or external causes.


The first volume of William Rowe’s splendid two volume study of the Yangzi city Hankou appeared in 1984. The EMC concept is central to Rowe’s work, although it is only explicitly applied in the second volume, which appeared in 1989. Rowe’s book was immediately recognised as a major historiographical accomplishment, and the notion of EMC, although only implicit in the first volume (which actually talks about “Late Imperial China”), was now essentially on the agenda of American scholarship on China.

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Rowe’s core argument is based on a critical discussion of Henri Pirenne and Max Weber: “… an influential school of Western historiography came to identify the inadequate development of urban institutions as the principal cause of China’s ‘backwardness’. According to this view, urban places in China had failed to perform the catalytic function necessary to bring about the sorts of social, economic, and political change that had transformed the West since medieval times and provided the basis of its superior material civilization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

The Pirenne-Weber argument is condensed in this way: “… the urban commune movement in medieval Europe has been held to have left numerous legacies … all of which have become part of the general cultural myth we cherish as describing modern Western society. Legally, it created the ideal of the freedom and equality of individuals before the law… and the free alienation of property. Thus it hastened the demise of the feudal system. Politically, it left a heritage of democracy and widespread enfranchisement, as well as a corporate political body with a clearly demarcated public sector… Intellectually, it fostered the primacy of rationality… Finally, in the area of economic organization, the urban communities of the Middle Ages laid the groundwork for early capitalism.”

China was used by Weber precisely as the counter-example to drive home his argument about the importance of the city in European history. According to Weber, in China, “true ‘cities’ never came into being, since the ‘urban community’ that was their necessary prerequisite never existed.” For two reasons: first, “the central administration was consistently too heavy for urban autonomy ever to have developed,” second, “there were even more compelling socioreligious factors in China to inhibit the development of any urban community that might effectively press for political rights;” Chinese particularism and the all-important kinship organisations precluded the development of a true city identity.

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30 Rowe 1984, p. 3.
31 Rowe 1984, p. 4.
32 Rowe 1984, p. 4.
33 Rowe 1984, p. 5.
The entire thrust of Rowe’s work is the refutation of these well-known assumptions about the role of the city in Chinese history. He chose Hankou as his object of study precisely because it was a “vanguard locality” as a flourishing trade centre, yet it played this vanguard role well before the Western impact became significant to the city: “… the study is designed to portray a locality that reflected the highest stage of the indigenous development of Chinese urbanism before wholesale imitation of Western models arguably deflected this process into a new era of pan-cultural urban history…”

In the conclusion, Rowe claims that his study has demonstrated that Hankou was already on a track of urban change well before the Western impact: “[t]he changes suggested in this study can be summarized under four headings: commerce, personal identity, social structure, and social organization.” As for commerce, Hankou exhibited all the features of “a long-term trend toward the privatization of many sectors of the Chinese economy, which had begun by at least the seventeenth century.” The representatives of the state chose to sacrifice control over commerce for its stimulation, and “merchant self-regulation superseded direct state control in the trades of Hankow.” With respect to personal identity, Rowe points to growing geographical mobility in Qing China; this “facilitated the rise of a specifically urban consciousness and the emergence of a true ‘urban class’…” In terms of social structure, Hankou exhibited features of growing pluralism and self-conscious class differentiation. Finally, as regards social organisation, Rowe points to the growth and central role of the Hankou guilds: “By the last decades of the nineteenth century, a de facto power-sharing arrangement had come into being in Hankow, in which the role of the bureaucratic administration had been dramatically reduced … This reflected a gradual popularization of political functions

34 Rowe 1984, pp. 13-14.
35 Rowe 1984, p. 341.
36 Rowe 1984, p. 341.
37 Rowe 1984, p. 342.
38 Rowe 1984, p. 342.
39 Rowe 1984, p. 343.
that paralleled (though it lagged behind) the privatization of economic power.”

We shall return to Rowe in a little while; for the moment it is enough to say that his first Hankou volume from 1984 was a huge step forward in the exploration of Chinese urban culture before the twentieth century. Without explicitly using the EMC concept, the basic structure of the argument in this first volume is essentially within the EMC paradigm.


Mary Rankin’s study of the emerging “public sphere” in nineteenth-century China is often mentioned in tandem with Rowe’s work. And like the first of Rowe’s two volumes introduced above, although it does not explicitly subscribe to the EMC terminology, it is actually very much a part of the same research strategy.

The keywords in Rankin’s study are *public sphere* and *public opinion*. Rankin does not explicitly invoke the name of Jürgen Habermas, but it is very much his ideas that shape the argument. As for the public sphere, “… the concept of public activity was well established in China by the mid-nineteenth century. In Confucian theory, public [gong] concern was a general good defined by the state, as opposed to the private, selfish [si] interests of one or a few… As I use the term here, ‘public’ retains a considerable communal element but refers more specifically to the institutionalized, extrabureaucratic management of matters considered important by both the community and the state. Public management by elites thus contrasted with official administration [guan] and with private [si] activities of individuals, families, religions, businesses, and organizations that were not identified with the whole community.”

Rankin’s core idea is that “[t]he public sphere grew during the Qing as population size and mobility, growing trade, increasing numbers of market centres, and expanding social organization made the administrative

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40 Rowe 1984, p. 344.
capacity of the bureaucracy obsolete.”

As for public opinion, Rankin claims that oppositional public opinion developed in the late Qing in the context of changing relations between the scholar-gentry elite and the state: “… it can be suggested that the late Qing opposition was heir to several stages of first apolitical and then political concern over current affairs. As public opinion developed, so did more activist conceptions of the scholar’s role, which also served to redefine elite connections with the state.”

The Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) played a decisive role in the formation of the public sphere and public opinion, as “post-rebellion reconstruction fostered a rapid and permanent expansion of elite-managed, quasi-governmental local activities… assertive elites began to engage in new kinds of competition with official representatives of the state.”

Mary Rankin’s study of growing “elite activism” in the late Qing is squarely set in a framework of “state vs. society”, as demonstrated in these quotations: “… changes in the loci of initiative shifted power away from the bureaucracy toward the social elites…”, “[e]lite public managerial activities were an important arena of state-societal interaction that could reflect broader socio-political trends…” But the theoretical infrastructure of Rankin’s work is problematic, as should already be apparent from her frequent use of a very vaguely defined “elite” concept. How does she distinguish between the “state” vs. the “social” dimensions of the “elite”? Further, it may be argued that late Qing “elite activism” is in fact a part of the dynastic cycle, since similar developments occurred in the late Ming, when local elites tried to save important social functions as the power of the state crumbled.


When Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski, two of the most experienced and distinguished Qing specialists in the field of Chinese history, published

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42 Rankin 1986, p. 16.
43 Rankin 1986, p. 22.
44 Rankin 1986, p. 3.
45 Rankin 1986, p. 4.
46 Rankin 1986, p. 5.
their volume on *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* in 1987, the discourse on EMC had already gained a lot of momentum. The notion of “the extension of national urban culture”\(^{47}\) thus echoes Rowe, while the remark that “overworked officials gradually but more willingly delegated some government functions to local elites”\(^{48}\) is reminiscent of Rankin. In their preface, Naquin and Rawski explicitly argue for the adoption of the EMC concept: “… general surveys of modern Chinese history cannot usually devote much space to an era before (supposedly) the real beginning of the modern period – conventionally dated from 1840, when China was defeated in the Opium War… The eighteenth century was one of the most dynamic periods in China’s early modern era, a time when rulers of the newly established Qing dynasty (1644-1911) tried to harness the surge of economic growth and social change that had been interrupted by the transition from the previous dynasty.”\(^{49}\) The two scholars emphasise the importance of the growing world trade in a description of eighteenth century China that should sound rather familiar by now:

- “As China became part of an emerging world economy, foreign trade stimulated a new sequence in the process of economic development. Commercialization, urbanization, and increasing social and physical mobility encouraged the relaxation of fixed statuses and produced a more and more differentiated society, marked by intense competition for wealth, degrees, and other concomitants of elite status… Merchants helped knit the empire together with interregional trading networks and their own urban culture.”\(^{50}\)

Despite their commitment to “la longue durée” (Fernand Braudel and the Annales School) and to “history from the bottom up”, Naquin and Rawski are particularly concerned with the relationship between economic and social change on the one hand and political developments on the other, arguing that “the state’s actions affected the lives of even ordinary citizens.”\(^{51}\) But their discussion of the role of the state is enigmatic. On the

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\(^{48}\) Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. 229.

\(^{49}\) Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. ix.

\(^{50}\) Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. x.

\(^{51}\) Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. xi.
one hand, they describe a state power hampered by “an inability to keep up with expanding responsibilities… The difficulties the Qing state had in keeping pace with a society and economy that were becoming increasingly large and complex…”\textsuperscript{52} On the other hand, “the Qing responded to these demands not by giving up but by bettering, enlarging, and extending government.”\textsuperscript{53} In line with Rankin (but contrary to conventional wisdom), they claim that the power of the emperor was probably reduced in the course of the dynasty, not because the Qing emperors were incompetent but “by the expansion of government and the development of ever more effective bureaucratic institutions.”\textsuperscript{54} The implicit paradox of a Qing state incapable of keeping up with the momentum of social change yet reacting rationally to the challenge logically make Naquin & Rawski ask: “Why didn’t the Qing extend the state apparatus further?” The question is interesting for our discussion of the EMC discourse since it vividly displays the “shadow logic” implicit in the EMC approach: the question only makes sense if you assume a “normal” trajectory of growing state intervention, bureaucratic rationalisation, and so forth, associated with “early modernity” in the European context.

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This is the second and concluding volume of Rowe’s \textit{magnum opus}, the main focus of which is on social life in Hankou. It starts with the programmatic endorsement of the EMC approach: “A number of scholars, convinced that in Europe changes in production accompanying the later phase of commercial intensification were direct antecedents of the industrial revolution, have recently taken to describing this era and the distinctive urban societies it produced as ‘protoindustrial’. Readers familiar with the protoindustrialisation argument will notice a number of basic similarities between the conditions it describes and my own

\textsuperscript{52} Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. 221.  
\textsuperscript{53} Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. 223.  
\textsuperscript{54} Naquin & Rawski 1987, p. 224.
depiction of Hankow … I have chosen instead to refer to the period using a less controversial but roughly equivalent term, ‘early modern’.”

Early modern European city life was full of conflicts and often violent riots. What about Hankou? Rowe’s argument is counterintuitive “… if Hankow shared each of these basic economic and social characteristics with cities of the early modern West, its social history nevertheless diverged from theirs in at least one very striking way. European cities of the early modern era have been widely portrayed as centres of riotous protest… Even without comparison with the West, Hankow experienced a lower incidence of protest than the conditions of its own violent and contentious society and the wrenching social changes of the early modern era might lead one to expect. Why was this so? I will argue here that a basic reason – a reason that runs counter to the assumptions of much sinological literature – was the compelling strength of the Chinese urban community.” With this proposition Rowe has turned received wisdom upside down; from the refutation of the classical Weberian argument about the weakness and poor social integration of China’s urban communities, he has moved on to the claim that an “early modern” Chinese city such as Hankou was in fact more integrated than its European counterparts.

Rowe’s arguments were carefully examined and criticized by Frederic Wakeman, Jr. in the journal Modern China in 1993. Briefly put, Wakeman is unable to agree with Rowe’s characterisation of nineteenth century Hankou as a highly integrated urban community with a high degree of social autonomy, a city identity, and so on. But it is testimony to the quality and subtlety of Rowe’s work that Wakeman is able to base his critique entirely on the information supplied by Rowe himself in the two Hankou volumes.

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56 Rowe 1989, pp. 5-6.
What about Jonathan Spence, one of the great masters of Chinese history from the late Ming to the present? He might appear marginal to this discussion since he carefully avoids the EMC terminology; but the period examined in his textbook on “modern” Chinese history is precisely the same as that studied by the proponents of EMC, that is, the late Ming onwards, and he points to many of the same phenomena (commercialisation, and so forth). Here is Spence’s own rationale for starting out in the late sixteenth century: “… [E]ven though it was not necessarily on any parallel ‘track’ to the developing Western powers or to Japan, China was constantly adapting and changing in important ways, even as it was struggling to preserve certain immutable values.”

Just what was China’s relationship to the process of modernisation? It is all in the title of the book (Search for Modern China): “… this remains a book about an ongoing search rather than about the conclusion of a search. I understand a ‘modern’ nation to be one that is both integrated and receptive, fairly sure of its own identity yet able to join others on equal terms in the quest for new markets, new technologies, new ideas… I like to think that there were modern countries – in the above sense – in AD 1600 or earlier, as at any moment in the centuries thereafter. Yet at no time in that span, nor at the end of the twentieth century, has China been convincing one of them.”

In fact, Spence readily admits that taking the late Ming as the starting point may be an arbitrary decision: “… even though it is commonplace to see this period as marking the birth of ‘modern Europe’, it is less easy to see it as the obvious starting point of a modern China.”

So China’s relationship to modernity is one of frustration and “search”. A critic might argue that Spence’s definition of modernity is anacronistic, idealistic – and very American. The criteria suggested by Spence would reduce all other countries to the status of an

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59 Ibid.
60 Spence 1990, p. 3.
apprentice as well; in fact the whole world is searching for modernity as it is portrayed by Spence.

Craig Clunas: *Superfluous Things. Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (1991)

The “Superfluous Things” of the title refer to a late Ming guide related to questions of “good taste” in upper-class consumption and connoisseurship, the *Treatise on Superfluous Things*. So Clunas’s book, in line with trends of contemporary historiography, moves the focus from production to consumption. EMC is central to the work: “The concept of an ‘early modern period’, from about 1500 to 1800, is a familiar one to historians of the West but is a less comfortable concept when applied to China… It seems to offer a more fruitful way of looking at the period than does the now-hackneyed ‘sprouts of capitalism’ controversy, initiated in China in the 1950s, which subjected a limited body of evidence to historical changes in the relations of production during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to intense scrutiny, searching for signs of autochthonous roots for Chinese capitalism… The present study attempts to say something of relevance on this question, if only by taking attention away from the question of production and focusing it more firmly on consumption…”

So what has Clunas found? “The growth in the acceptability and use of objectified, fact-centred methods of cultivation among the elite can be seen as part of a larger picture which can encompass the technological treatise, the guidebook to interior decoration, the statistical compilation, the merchant route book, the householder’s manual and the didactic work on norms of behaviour, under the very broad rubric of the commoditization of knowledge.”

This is Clunas’s connection to the “early modern” approach, since, as he quotes Chandra Mukerji: “The growth of materialism in early modern Europe is evidenced by Europeans’ increasing preoccupation with objects…” Clunas is thus able to conclude that “[t]he

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evidence I have sought to present tends, in my view, to undermine the unique nature of early modern European consumption patterns, or even to show them as lagging behind equivalent developments in China.”

According to this logic, China’s “early modern” period was perhaps even earlier than Europe’s! What happened, then? Or, in Clunas’s own words, “why, if sixteenth-century China exhibits so many consumption patterns paralleling those of Europe, eighteenth-century China yet ‘feels’ totally different from eighteenth-century Europe.”

Clunas suggests a number of causes, important among them the notion that the traumatic Qing conquest produced an aversion to the perceived decadence and rottenness of the late Ming: “Consumption went out of fashion… Talking about things had become superfluous.”

Clunas’s 1991 book picks up the connection between social and economic change on the one hand and cultural change on the other (cf. Ropp and Porter). The basic structure of the argument is similar to Ropp’s, that is, the idea of an internally produced “early modern” trajectory of change in China that was somehow interrupted, perhaps due to the particularities of the Qing dynasty and the circumstances of its victory. But it is a subtle and sophisticated version of the argument – indispensable for anyone interested in Ming material culture.


Ownby’s study of Chinese hui (“Secret Societies”) in the eighteenth century gives a prominent place to the EMC concept, which is claimed to be “one of the most important interpretations of Ming-Qing history in the past two decades. Just as commercialization gave rise to guilds in Europe and huiguan in China, it may be that the pressure on the traditional institutions created by the rise of the early modern order facilitated the formation of hui among marginal young men ‘emancipated’ from the

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64 Clunas 1991, p. 171.
The defining characteristics of EMC is now-familiar – but well put by Ownby:

- "Early modern" refers to a distinct period, from the late 1500s through the disintegration of the imperial order in the early twentieth century, and a distinctive set of social arrangements. Increased commercialization and a more sophisticated division of labor resulted from foreign trade, New World silver, and population growth. This same population growth encouraged spatial mobility, and commercialization and the spread of literacy facilitated a degree of social mobility as well. A freer social climate emerged, as formal status distinctions were lifted and the lives of the common people of China came to be controlled as much by the marketplace as by the landlord."

In his concluding discussion, however, Ownby is more specific, as he reduces the idea of an early modern social order to two fundamental developments: economic growth and the emancipation of labor. As for the latter – crucial to Ownby’s discussion of “secret societies” as associations of marginalized young male laborers – the tax reforms initiated by the Ming reduced the degree of state control over labor as well as the “emancipation” from “feudal” social relationships due to urbanisation and absentee landlordism combined with demographic growth in the eighteenth century to “produce what may have been the most geographically mobile peacetime population in Chinese history.”

The South coast in the eighteenth century “was a mobile, competitive, fragmented, violent society.” The pressures of atomisation and an impersonal job market forced many to seek the protection of the “secret societies”.

The value of Ownby’s 1993 study to our discussion is that it provides a window to the lower end of the social ladder within the EMC discourse; so far, most of the material has been related to general characterisations of

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69 Ownby 1993, p. 58.
70 Ownby 1993, p. 60.
society or to the upper classes. Ownby’s presentation is also one of the most enthusiastic endorsements of the “early modern” approach. Alas, only three years later Ownby reversed course, abandoning – without any discussion of the reasons for this significant change of strategy – “early modern” in favor of the traditional “late imperial” terminology in his 1996 monograph *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China.*

**Craig Clunas: *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (1997)**

Despite the EMC concept being prominently displayed in the title of Clunas’ 1997 study, this book is actually marginal to our discussion as compared with his 1991 book. In the introduction Clunas writes that “[t]he term ‘early modern China’ in the title of this book is thus a deliberate provocation, above all a provocation to those who continue to ground accounts of European exceptionalism over the last 500 years on a secure foundation of ignoring all other histories.” But in the conclusion, Clunas warns against all forms of reductionism, such as the idea of seeing the early emergence of “abstract art” in China (the “denarrativisation of the ocular” or the “disentanglement of the figural from its textual task”) as modernism *avant la lettre.* Proudly loyal to the EMC concept in the title of his recent book, Clunas, like most other EMC scholars, has in fact already parted ways with the EMC historiographical strategy.

**“Early Modern China”: a critique**

We have seen the EMC concept employed in a number of works from the last two decades to capture the essence of a watershed of change in China since the sixteenth century. Most writers have placed commercialisation

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73 Clunas 1997, p. 188.
and population growth at the core of this change. Some have seen the contours of an emerging “civil society” or a “public sphere” (Rowe, Rankin). Some have pointed at cultural change in literature (subjectivity, vernacularisation) and material culture indicative of early modernity (Ropp, Clunas). Some have seen the signs of bureaucratic rationalization (Naquin & Rawski). Secularisation, “de-feudalisation”, and so forth have been pointed out in several studies.

But is EMC really “one of the most important interpretations of Ming-Qing history in the past two decades” as claimed by Ownby? If that is so, it is a great mystery why there is hardly any cumulative build-up of scholarship. The studies examined above all seem to start from scratch, claiming EMC as a “heuristic device” or a “tentative framework”, but are apparently uninterested in other studies taking the same approach. Only in a few cases do we find any references at all to colleagues working within the same framework (Ownby is the exception). The fact that the EMC concept is used to cover very different periods of time makes it very difficult to establish a common framework.

The Procrustes bed of comparison is an obvious problem. Since the beginning of the 1980s the common denominator in the study of modern Chinese history has been the critique of the (Fairbankian) approach associated with “China’s response to the West”; the new approach has been coined “China-centered history” by Paul Cohen. But the EMC terminology, despite intentions of “rehabilitating” Chinese history, has “brought Europe back in” as the master narrative. This means that the EMC strategy has invited criticism, not just from “traditionalists” in the field but certainly also from postmodernistic “rebels”. To quote Judith Farquhar and James Hevia: “It appears… that a China-centered history has returned us to the ‘discovery’ if a single trajectory of modernization, posited, miraculously, as empirically present in history, and coincidentally, based on histories of the same Europe that was so important for the

scholars of ‘China’s response to the West.’ We have NOT come any closer to “changing of the categories” (cf. Embree & Gluck).

Two paradoxes present themselves when we talk about EMC for the 1500-1800 period. The first is the “Song paradox”. In his now classical study of *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* from 1973, Elvin introduced the term “the medieval economic revolution” to describe the Song (960-1279), while he characterised the period celebrated by the EMC scholars as “quantitative growth, qualitative standstill.” The glory of the Song has hardly diminished since. Fairbank called it “China’s Greatest Age” in his great concluding synthesis *China – A New History* from 1991. Jacques Gernet went as far in his widely used textbook *A History of Chinese Civilization* from 1982: “There is not a single sector of political, social, or economic life in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries which does not show evidence of radical changes in comparison with earlier ages… A new world had been born whose basic characteristics are already those of the China of modern times.” It can be argued that many of the characterisations that accompany the EMC approach could easily – or even more appropriately – be applied to the Song. In his 1992 Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, the senior American expert on Chinese economic history Albert Feuerwerker chose as his title “Questions About China’s Early Modern Economic History That I Wish I Could Answer”. Feuerwerker’s use of the term “early modern” must be distinguished from the EMC approach, since he finds little evidence for “Smithian growth”, i.e. truly modern economic growth, in China before the late nineteenth century. The only exception is found in the Song: “… there is also the extraordinary case of Song China when, almost for the only time in world history before the great changes that began in early modern Europe, extensive growth seems to have accelerated – propelled by an exceptional density of technological invention and its diffusion – to a point at which in some regions true

75 Quoted from William T. Rowe: “The Problem of ‘Civil Society’ in Late Imperial China” (NB: note that “early modern China” has been changed back to “Late Imperial China”), *Modern China*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1993 [139-157]: 140.
intensive growth of output per capita was very likely achieved during the eleventh century.”

At the other end of our period another paradox appears: the more we struggle to see parallel trajectories in Europe and China 1500-1800, the more we knock our heads against the problem of explaining the very different outcomes of these parallels. Imperialism was clearly important (cf. Robert Y. Eng) but cannot explain everything. If China was “on the early modern track”, what happened? Considering the two paradoxes, we end up with a sort of Escher perspective, with a “dynamic” Chinese trajectory of early modern development since the Song which somehow doesn’t get anywhere.

This is related to the problem of the implicit teleology of the EMC concept. Whether applied to Europe or China, “early modernity” only makes sense in the light of its “goal” or destination. This is fine in the European case, since it is natural for us to ask how our world became modern, but it makes less sense in the Chinese case – unless we assume a “shadow manuscript” for history suggesting “normal” stages of development. Despite intentions, EMC is an implicitly aggressive historiographical strategy. For a more eloquent critique I have to turn to Ray Bin Wong’s discussion of Rankin and Rowe:

“This perspective, which stresses long-term Chinese historical changes, implicitly and effortlessly domesticates foreign possibilities and problems to fit into an already present trajectory. Moving from the understandable desire to debunk nineteenth-century notions of Chinese stagnation, this late twentieth-century alternative creates a Chinese trajectory of change modeled on parallels to an idealized European one.”

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77 Feuerwerker 1992, p. 768.
To summarise, despite Ownby’s proclamations and Clunas’s provocations, the EMC approach never really took off, and after 1993 the whole idea seems to be fading. Significantly, William Rowe himself abandoned EMC in favour of “Late Imperial China” in a 1993 article in *Modern China*, and Ownby did the same thing in his 1996 work, as mentioned above. Likewise, Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski have shelved EMC in their most recent work. The status quo of the matter seems to be that “Late Imperial China” rules! Articles, books and dissertations promoting the EMC approach still appear, but all the best scholarship coming out on the Ming-Qing transformation these years – Ray Bin Wong, Richard von Glahn, Robert Marks, Kenneth Pomeranz, and many others – employ the Late Imperial China framework, although in a much less limiting way than earlier generations of China historians. But two alternatives related to EMC that merit our attention have appeared in the 1990s: the idea of of an “early modern world” and that of multiple “early modernities”.

**An Early Modern World: the global perspective**

During the 1990s, a number of studies have appeared that use the concept “early modernity” on a scale that transcends the history of individual countries. The unifying theme for the Early Modern World, of course, is the New World discoveries and the emergence of a world market since 1500. Some historians apply the concept with great caution, emphasising the limited effects on Asian historical trajectories in the early stages of this process; only after 1750 did these effects become more pronounced. Other historians see the New World discoveries as the beginning of a world economic system ruled by its own economic laws and logic; China’s historical course in the 1500-1800 period is thus viewed as essentially a product of the workings of this “system” rather than the outcome of

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80 Eg. Ching-sheng Huang: *Jokes on the Four Books: Cultural Criticism in Early Modern China (Ming Dynasty)*, (Ph.D., University of Arizona, 1998).

internally generated “trajectories”. Andre Gunder Frank, to be discussed below, is the obvious example.

In an important historiographical debate on the H-Asia Net-list for Asian History and Culture in 1998, Jack Goldstone has argued that “... what needs to be explained is not a ‘long-term inevitable’ process that leads to industrialization, but a rare, one-off, developmental anomaly or ‘sport’ that leads England on what is, by world standards, a ‘peculiar path’;” Goldstone proceeded to outline a new historiographical interpretation that is emerging in American scholarship:

“... there is emerging what I like to call the ‘California’ school or interpretation of global economic history. This has been developed in good part by scholars in California, and holds that there were NO significant long-term advantages enjoyed by Europe over the main centres of civilization in Asia; that the level of technology, science, agriculture, and living standards were similar in these regions from 1000 to 1800 AD, with Europe lagging if anything until nearly the end of this period; and that even the dynamics of political and social structures and conflicts in Asia and Europe were essentially similar from 1500 to 1850. Moreover, it was China’s demand for silver... that drove world trading patterns, and provided a global trading system on which Europe ‘piggybacked’ its development; and it was only after 1750 that Europe suddenly began to gain an advantage in growth, technology, and power over its Eurasian rivals. Thus some sharp change must have occurred in Europe in the late 17th/early 18th centuries to create this ‘bifurcation’. "

It is time to turn our attention to Goldstone’s main work.

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82 H-Asia Net list for Asian History and Culture, 14 May 1998, Response #3 to “A Discussion of World History”, p. 3.
Jack Goldstone’s examination of common causes for the periodic waves of state breakdown in Europe, China, and the Middle East from 1500 to 1850 deservedly won the most important book award of the American Sociological Association in 1991. Why do state breakdowns in the history of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries seem to occur in “waves”? According to Goldstone, state breakdown was frequent from 1550 to 1650, but much less so during the next period, from 1650 to 1770. However, from 1700 to 1850 state breakdowns again proliferate. Further, if the cyclic character of state breakdowns in early modern Europe can be established, it is striking that similar cycles seemed to be in operation in other large countries of the Eurasian continent as well: the crisis patterns of the Ottoman Empire as well as China under the Ming and Qing roughly resemble the European pattern. Maybe the deep causes are common as well? Goldstone:

“For nearly 350 years scholars have wrestled with the ‘general crisis of the seventeenth century’. Certain facts are not in dispute. The first half of the seventeenth century saw a widespread slowing and eventual halt to the steady increases in population and prices that began around 1500. In addition, rebellions and revolutions shook regimes across the Eurasian continent, most notably the English Revolution, the Fronde in France; the anti-Hapsburg revolts...; the Khmelnitsky revolt in the Ukraine; the celati revolts in the Ottoman Empire; and the collapse of Ming rule in China... But there is no agreement on how to explain these facts. Historians contest fiercely over the causes, the connections, and the significance of these events.”

In Goldstone’s view, it is clearly insufficient to attribute all three stages to the identical cause of a “crisis of emerging capitalism”; some other forces

must be at play. The recurring crises of this era were all ultimately caused by a single basic factor: continued population growth in the context of relatively inflexible economic and social structures, eventually producing inflation and rising social demands. Population growth accelerated across Eurasia during the sixteenth century, leading to widespread social and political crisis, a halt in population growth (or a big decline, as in China) and massive state breakdown during the first part of the seventeenth century, renewed population growth throughout the eighteenth century – and a new wave of revolutions and breakdown.

But the original commonalities of Europe and Asia in this “early modern world” changed in the course of the process. Whereas “the states of early modern Eurasia – including the European monarchies, Russia, China, the Ottoman Empire, and Japan, in roughly the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries – were not greatly different from each other,” the outcomes were very different. This produces the main problematic of Goldstone’s very complex and sophisticated theory: “Why did the near simultaneous state breakdowns in major Asian empires resemble, in their origins, the state breakdowns in Europe? And to the extent that they had similar origins, why were the long-term outcomes so different, leading to that divergence in development commonly known as the ‘rise of the West’?” Much of the answer to the second question is found in ideology and culture, which is discussed in the final chapters of the book. While in Europe ideas of society and authority went through waves of revolutions, in “China, and the Ottoman Empire… the logical solution to the seventeenth-century crises was a reaffirmation of traditional orthodoxy.” This may be the least innovative part of Goldstone’s work. But the idea of common causes behind periodic waves of social and political crisis across Eurasia remains compelling. It should be noted that Goldstone’s demographic factor is not a Malthusian one: he argues convincingly that “there is increasing evidence that early modern populations controlled their fertility. Restrictions on marriage, and the practice of infanticide, meant that populations were not simply controlled by their ‘animal

84 Goldstone 1991, p. 4.
instincts’."\(^{87}\) The main cause of change was changing mortality: “The rule for early modern populations was simple: when mortality was low, the population grew; when mortality was high, the population declined or stagnated. Fertility control merely affected the rate of growth or decline.”\(^{88}\)

Goldstone’s ideas can be discussed on several levels. The crucial question is how the “pressures of population” manifested themselves. Goldstone carefully examines four issues related to population growth: (1) pressures on state finances as inflation eroded state income and population growth raised real expenses; (2) intra-elite conflicts became more intense as the number of high-status positions declined relative to the number of aspirants; (3) popular unrest grew with competition for land, urban migration, declining real wages, and increased youthfulness; (4) ideologies of rectification and transformation became increasingly salient.\(^{89}\)

In the end, the agrarian-bureaucratic states could not cope with all these pressures. In the Ming case, these four issues can easily be identified, but this does not present the whole picture; in China, there was nothing similar to the religion wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the Ming elite only abandoned their dynasty under extreme pressure (and often even not then). Demography is clearly important, but it remains just one out of several factors.

At the level of historiography, what is really the “early modern world”, when what is joined together under this heading is a number of agrarian-bureaucratic states that struggled with cycles of crises? Only some of these – the European cases – transformed society and state to the point where population growth no longer dictated events with the industrialisation and mass emigration of the nineteenth century. China and the Ottoman Empire did not. In what sense does this make Ming China a


\(^{88}\) Goldstone 1991, p. 28.

part of an “early modern world” – what aspects of it are “early modern”? As I understand Goldstone’s vision of “early modern”, it implies a potential rather than a trajectory. But a basic problem with Goldstone’s methodological setup – the comparison of the crises and transformations of a number of agrarian-bureaucratic states across the Eurasian continent – is that it blocks the view to the fundamental difference between European and Chinese historical trajectories in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries: Europe’s state building and mercantile expansion in a competitive environment.


In this recent book, Andre Gunder Frank, like Goldstone, applies the term “early modern world” to the period from 1400 to 1800, but with a different twist: according to Frank, the world already formed a single economic system from 1400 onwards, and it is this interdependence that defines “early modernity”. The early world economic system has already been explored by master historians such as Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein, but in Frank’s view these studies are flawed by Eurocentrism; the purpose of *ReOrient* is to overturn conventional wisdom and show that in fact Asia, and more particularly China, was the true centre of the world economic system throughout the entire 1400-1800 period, only to falter towards the end of that period. Europe was marginal compared to the huge and highly efficient economies of Asia, but “Europe used its American money to buy itself a ticket on the Asian economic train”90, and with an economic downturn in Asia towards the end of the eighteenth century, Europe finally had its golden opportunity to advance.

Frank’s idea of “horizontally integrative macrohistory” is promising, but reading the book is exasperating. It is aggressive, repetitive and deliberately biased. It is based on a huge array of sources, but Frank often quotes his sources out of context, twisting the views of economic historians such as Kenneth Pomeranz, Richard von Glahn and Ray Bin Wong to suit his needs despite profound differences of opinion. Frank is

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right about the relative volume of European and Asian economies throughout most of the period in question; but it is less easy to agree with his vision of an all-important “world economic system” starting in 1400, and his explanations for Asian decline and Europe’s rise in the late eighteenth century are unconvincing. Frank’s own answer to the crucial question of why Chinese “dynamics” somehow began to falter in the late eighteenth century is a mixture of time-honoured but inadequate explanations (population growth, Mark Elvin’s “high equilibrium trap”) and mysterious “Kondratieff cycles” that work across centuries. But why did these cycles hurt Asia and help Europe precisely at the end of the eighteenth century? Population does not explain anything when you consider the fact that England’s population growth basically matched China’s in the eighteenth century.\footnote{Cf. Peer Vries: ”Should we really ReORIENT?” Itinerario, vol. XXII (1998), no. 3: 19-38.} Frank creates an image of Europe and Asia contesting for economic supremacy within a single economic system since 1400, but this greatly overstates the significance of the world trading system for the individual countries involved; it also fails to acknowledge the fact that much of China’s proclaimed “dynamism” and technological advances in the 1400-1800 period actually belongs to the preceding Song period.

Speaking more generally, Frank and to a lesser extent Goldstone, conjure an image of an “early modern world” where the industrial revolution could have happened anywhere; the fact that it actually took place in Europe is reduced to the accidental working of the system and to “deep” economic cycles (Frank) or a “freak” development in England (Goldstone). But this is fiction! The “early modern world” was not an undifferentiated mass, and China in the 1500-1800 period was never on the verge of an industrial revolution; Europe, by contrast, was engulfed in a torrent of change throughout this period, with the industrial revolution becoming ever more “likely”.
Another alternative: global modernities

Most recently, yet another alternative has appeared. Actually Craig Clunas was the first to use the modernity concept in the plural in his 1997 book, although without any further discussion of the implications. Maybe that is not necessary; the point, obviously, is to make the “early modernity” approach more spacious and less aggressively universal. But it immediately raises new questions as to the definition of “modernity”.

In 1998 *Dædalus* (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) launched the “pluralistic approach” in its summer issue entitled “Early Modernities”. In the introduction, Shmuel Eisenstadt and Wolfgang Schluchter are right in arguing that “[n]ot convergence but divergence has ruled the history of modernity”\(^{93}\), and that [w]hile the common starting point… was indeed the cultural program of modernity as it developed in Europe, its creative appropriation by those that followed inaugurated multiple modernities.”\(^{94}\) (I think it is perhaps more precise to talk about modernisation as a combination of homogenisation and heterogenisation, as in the well-known phrase “we are becoming more and more different – but in an increasingly identical way.”) The basic assumption of Eisenstadt and Schluchter, however, seems to be that since there are multiple modernities, there must also be multiple “early modernities”. The mantra of studying non-European civilisations “on their own terms” is repeated several times. The emotional motivation for this kind of cultural relativism is understandable; after all, who has the right to dictate to everybody else what modernity is all about? After two World Wars and a number of other disasters, the self-confidence of the West is just a shadow of its former self. But doesn’t this blow up the concept of modernity?

In actual practice, however, Eisenstadt and Schluchter are still thinking in terms of the “parallel trajectories” that we have already seen implicit in the EMC literature: “The story of the construction of this type of collective identity in Europe… has been studied in great detail. Parallel developments can be observed in the realm of Islam under the Ottoman Safavid and Mogul Empires, in China under the Ming and Ching [Qing],

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\(^{92}\) Clunas 1997, p. 188.
\(^{94}\) Eisenstadt & Schluchter 1998, p. 5.
in Japan under the Tokugawa, in Vietnam, and even in Southeast Asia… The differences are closely related to the long-term processes that have affected all the great civilizations of Europe and Asia during the last millennium. They involve a shift towards the use of vernacular languages, a reconstruction of collective identities, and considerable modifications in the nature of the political order."95 The plural form of modernity has not solved our problems.

Discussion

‘La Longue Durée’ of Early Modern China

If we are to apply the term “early modernity” to the Chinese case, I would suggest that we need to make at least two adjustments. First, we need to talk about a millennium of EMC, not just two or three centuries. The fact is that China actually experienced many of the same changes that we try to capture with the term Early Modern Europe, but on a much larger time-scale. The “de-feudalisation” of Chinese society is a long-term process that spans the entire millennium from 800 to 1800; a closer look shows a number of “waves” in this direction, from the emergence of gentry society and the commercialisation of the manor in the Song to the eventual dissolution of the manors in the Ming and the emergence of something like a labor market in the Qing. Commercialisation shows the same pattern: it is now customary to talk about the “two phases” of commercialisation in China, Song being home to the first and Ming-Qing to the second, but again, on closer inspection I would suggest that one could identify several “waves” in the process. Political and bureaucratic rationalisation is the same story. As is the story of cultural changes associated with “early modernity”.

Second, we would probably have to abandon the core idea of “early modernity” as a kind of runway towards modernity for individual countries and economies. But this is complex. What would have happened after the Qing if the Europeans had never found the sea route to China? (This is pure fiction, of course, because China has always been part of the world,

very much so after 1500.) China could hardly have “reverted” to a situation like the early Ming, but on the other hand, I don’t believe that China was on the verge of a decisive “leap forward” to modernity. Maybe China could have continued on its trajectory of “early modernity” for a very long time… But without an actual “take-off”, the whole idea of “early modernity” loses its meaning. Simply put, I guess that we shall have to accept the fact that very large, highly commercialized, bureaucratically sophisticated – but still essentially premodern – societies are a stable, sustainable, certainly normal and perhaps even healthy form of human society.

Whose Early Modern?
China and Europe may be seen as connected throughout the last millennium in an emergent Euro(afro)asian dynamic, the final stage of which – the modern world – made parts and features of this process meaningfully appear in retrospect as “early modern”. But how much should be included in terms of geographical and temporal space? The value of the new world history of the 1980s and 1990s is to cast the net much wider; the emergent dynamic can be traced back to the Song commercial expansion and the Mongol conquests, which for the first time connected practically all of Euroasia with enormous effects in terms of technology, trade, political structures, disease patterns (the Black Death), and so forth. The dynamic of this new interconnectedness was added to the dynamic already inherent in the main centres of the continent: Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. But the effects of the new “superstructure” differed, as did the nature of the dynamic in these different centres. However, a common momentum was there, although perhaps not yet at any point of no return; that point was reached with the Discoveries and the new world economy of the sixteenth and following centuries. And throughout, China and Europe have interacted within this emerging matrix; both have contributed to, and suffered from, the creation of the modern world; but in very different ways.
Qualitative versus quantitative change

This is a vast topic, but my point is that we should critically examine the standard metaphor of “quantitative” versus “qualitative”, which is behind much of the logic of the “early modern” historiography – and very explicit in the works of Mark Elvin, John King Fairbank, and many others. China’s 1500-1800 period was “quantitative change” versus the “qualitative change” of Early Modern Europe. But in Chinese history, the social and institutional changes associated with the installation of the Manchu conquest rule in the seventeenth century – to take one example – were certainly profound; in what sense do they disqualify as “qualitative”? The final argument is that they did not produce modernity; but this is circular and pointless.

Simply put, if you compare “early modern” Europe with “late imperial” China, some dynamics were similar, others were not. And we need not look for some kind of essential difference in terms of “economic”, “political” or “cultural” matters (as the modern world has come to call them). Many differences are significant, but the overshadowing difference, of course, is the very different history of state building in Europe and China in this period. Europe experienced “strength through disunity”, whereas China experienced – a kind of – “strength through unity”, but ultimately that was a very different kind of strength.

Modernism in historiography

The changing trends in China historiography in the last decades resemble similar trends in the field of Antiquity Studies. Since 1973, which saw the publication of M. I. Finley’s The Ancient Economy, debates on the nature of Roman society and economy have been distributed on a continuum between the primitivists, such as Finley, arguing that Roman society was essentially very different from capitalism and modernization, and their modernist critics, who see it as highly commercialised and in many ways not incompatible with modern society. The “modernists” of Antiquity

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96 P. F. Bang: “Fra Occidenten til Orienten og tilbage igen: Romerriget mellem ‘primitiv’ kapitalisme og agrare imperier” [“From the Occident to the Orient and back: The Roman Empire between ‘primitive’ capitalism and agrarian empires”], i
studies seem related to the EMC scholarship on China. The challenge today is to transcend the two positions. In a recent study of Roman economy, the young Danish historian Peter Bang has suggested a starting point:

“What modernists and primitivists had in common was that they saw the evolution of European capitalism as an obvious thing. In the primitivist approach this manifested itself in attempts at explaining what prevented other cultures from evolving in the European direction. Much of the modernist critique has been related to ‘defending’ the different high cultures and show that they suffered from no defects or blockages.”

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The point is that the emergence of capitalism was an exceptional event, so it should not be made a parameter for evaluating premodern societies.

A Postmortem of EMC?
In the final analysis, the real question is why the EMC approach emerged in the early 1980s, and why it dissipated in the 1990s? The approach itself is a “victim of history” and deserves to be examined historically.

My first point is that the EMC approach became intertwined with the emerging civil society approach in the 1980s; by the end of the decade, it had become a platform for a bold rethinking of China’s entire “early modern”/”late imperial” plus “modern” periods which saw a trajectory of a new civil society latent in the Chinese world from the late Ming onwards, emerging briefly in the reform movements of the late Qing, sometimes during the Republic (1912-1949), sporadically in the PRC, but dramatically resurfacing in the 1980s with the 1989 Democracy Movement as its culmination.98 That vision gradually faded during the 1990s, as

97 Bang 1999, p. 34.
98 A discussion of this is found in Søren Clausen: “Current Western Perceptions of Chinese Political Culture”, in Søren Clausen, Roy Starrs, and Anne Wedell-
Chinese society slipped back into its bureaucratic, clannish and back door practises.

Second, the 1993 issue of *Modern China* entitled “The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture” quoted above had an enormous influence. Particularly the patient and critical examination of the EMC approach by leading scholar Frederic Wakeman, Jr. persuaded many to abandon the idea.

Third, in a broader context, the EMC approach has shared the fate of “modernism” generally in contemporary historiography; today the trend is towards particularism and specificity. Perhaps Modernity is simply much less sure of itself today?

*Who are we to ask?*

What are we to do, then? Maybe the first thing we need to do is to give up the ambition of writing the history of other civilisations “on their own terms”. I cannot help feeling relieved by the frankness in the title of Mark Elvin’s recent book *China – Another History. Essays on China from a European Perspective* (1996), which puts together texts from a lifetime of scholarship. Why would Elvin be so “Eurocentric”, so politically incorrect? “Because Europe, in the last analysis, is where the questions underlying most of these essays on China came from…” 99 World history is all well and good, but perhaps the simple and basic fact of history is that it is always somebody’s history. The “subject” of world history is – at best – only beginning to emerge in the current rush towards globalisation. World historians are writing for the future.

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Summary

This paper critically examines the historiographical strategy associated with the concept “Early Modern China”. During the last two decades, a significant number of books and articles dealing with particularly Ming (1368-1644) and Qing China (1644-1911) have employed this concept in order to focus better on features of Chinese society that were analogous to contemporary developments in early modern Europe. The paper examines a number of these studies and shows that during the 1980s studies focusing on internally generated features of ‘early modernity’ in China prevailed, whereas in the 1990s new notions of an ‘early modern world’ or even multiple ‘early modernities’ have been suggested. It is argued that the historiographical strategy associated with “Early Modern China” is now on the defensive, caught up in a basic structural flaw in the approach: despite the wish to give more space and attention to China as an active part in the creation of the modern world, the approach actually submits China to a conceptual regime that blocks the view of fundamental differences between Europe and China.

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