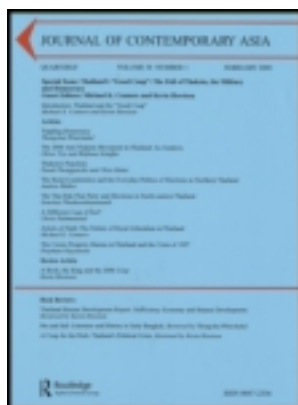


This article was downloaded by: [University of Sydney]

On: 23 February 2014, At: 16:33

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Contemporary Asia

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjoc20>

China and the Battle with Modernity

Kerry Brown^a

^a Chatham House, St James's Square, London, UK

Published online: 11 Mar 2011.

To cite this article: Kerry Brown (2011) China and the Battle with Modernity, Journal of Contemporary Asia, 41:2, 324-330, DOI: [10.1080/00472336.2011.553051](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2011.553051)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2011.553051>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

REVIEW ARTICLE

China and the Battle with Modernity

KERRY BROWN

Chatham House, St James's Square, London, UK

The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity

Wang Hui (London: Verso Books, 2010)

There is a unique trajectory of Chinese development, something which anyone writing about China, from within or without, has to wrestle with whenever they try to understand where the country has come from, where it is and where it is going. But finding the vocabulary and the intellectual framework with which to articulate this has proved tough. It is intrinsically elusive. Wang Hui is one of contemporary China's most prominent intellectuals. His most recent collection of essays begins with a preface in which he locates two very specific differences which were to grow up between China and the rest of the Communist bloc – a categorical assertion of its own sovereignty and an equally trenchant focus on self-reliance. Originally part of a socialist camp within a polarising system, in the 1950s the Chinese state became sovereign and self-reliant very early on after the revolution in 1949. “Absent this condition of self reliance,” Wang states, “and it would be very difficult to picture how China's path to reform and opening up would have looked” (p. xix). There is an intimate link, therefore, between how the People's Republic of China (PRC) started, and where it stands now, however different these two now look. That is, therefore, where this discussion starts.

We are living in a period of transition. Before Wang can even talk much about modernity (and here he means the importation of industrial processes, technologies and ideas from the West) itself, he has to admit that at the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, we are at a stage where social relations, economic lifestyles and political subjectivities are undergoing radical change, and they look set to overturn the two postulates of Chinese modernity of the last half-century mentioned above. Self-reliance and sovereignty now have to accommodate markets opened by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), laws harmonised at national and provincial level with international regulations, and political actions which are

Correspondence Address: Kerry Brown, Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE, UK.
Email: Kbrown@chathamhouse.org.uk

partially legitimated through the United Nations (witness China's efforts on Iran after pressure from the other members of the Security Council Permanent Five). Globalisation is now the most powerful force in China and, as Wang states later in the book, not something that is occurring outside the country, but happening within it, changing it in ways that were never imagined (pp. 90-1).

Globalisation's outcomes are hard to predict. This gives it its particular volcanic energy and danger. It has not brought about the wholesale victory of Western-style representative democracy for instance, despite some early predictions that it would lead to such a political outcome. Moreover, the multi-party system in many countries is in crisis. Low turn-outs at elections, disenfranchisements of large swathes of the population and highly polarised arguments around the state and its role in the economy or in the provision of social services (as exemplified by the highly divisive debate in the USA over Medicare in 2010) all illustrate how imperfect democratic systems sometimes are in delivering efficient decision making in specific societies. China has its own set of challenges, arising from a political structure where the Party and state, after initial moves to separate themselves in 1978, at the very beginning of the reform and opening up process, have now created a new accommodation. While the state executes, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) somehow presents itself as "neutral" and, in the words of the current Constitution from 1982, expressing "the sovereign will of the people." At a time when figures who are themselves related to former elite leaders in the CCP (the "princelings") were likely to dominate the next Politburo from 2012, and when more and more of the CCP's actions seem like those of a self-protecting, self-preserving elite, this is an astonishingly creative way for the CCP to articulate its new legitimacy.

Wang's primary objective in the first essays of this collection is to understand this current situation through a look at China's most recent history. While there is widespread interest in the protest movement of the 1960s that occurred in Europe and North America, Wang observes that in Asia most wish to move on and forget a past century and a half dominated by struggles against imperialist domination. The political agenda of the twenty-first century has moved a long way from those times. The intellectual legacy of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 onwards, which was linked through its frustration with bureaucratic power structures with what was happening in Europe and North America, should not, he warns, be forgotten. It is, after all, from this generation – so marked by the mass campaigns against the Party itself promoted by Mao – that the current elite political leadership of China comes. The Chinese 1960s, he states, contained a depoliticising tendency, with anti-bureaucratisation struggles, even though these deteriorated into factional fights where violence dominated in the end. The Cultural Revolution, on Wang's reading, does highlight a feature of modern Chinese history: "Every great political battle was inextricably linked to serious theoretical considerations and policy debate" (p. 6). That remains true to this day, with more recent Party Secretaries like Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao trying to enshrine their own ideological contribution into the state constitution and with Xi Jinping, or any other successor, likely to have to prove his own ideological mettle in the period before his likely anointment as Hu's replacement in 2012.

There was one concrete outcome of the Cultural Revolution, and that was the way in which the Party responded to the instability and social violence and division which

occurred then by attempting to change itself into a “bureaucratic machine,” without, Wang argues a “distinctive evaluative role,” but more “a structural functionalist relationship to society” (p. 9). For the CCP, the Cultural Revolution was, indeed, a crisis, but one which led to self-renewal, replacing the intense politicisation of Chinese society from 1966 with a huge depoliticisation. This can be seen in the conscious effort to separate politics and economics by the Party over the last three decades. The final moment of this process was the readmission of business people back into the CCP in 2001. The enemies of the Cultural Revolution had finally come in from the cold.

The other more indirect legacy of this highly xenophobic era, one in which China in 1967 had only one ambassador still based abroad (in Egypt) is more about how China looks outward. The wholesale and dogmatic assertions of sovereignty and non-interference in its own affairs which characterised Maoism have been radically eroded. Two specific cases show how far China has moved from this. The first is its entry to the World Trade Organisation in 2001, which showed that it appreciated the importance for its own development of a global, rules-based trade system. And the second was the highly pragmatic final agreement on the “one country, two systems” mechanism for Hong Kong after its reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 where, in purely ideological terms, it made a big concession in allowing a unique kind of sovereignty to the Special Administrative Region, tolerating it operating with a “high degree of autonomy” over everything except defence and foreign affairs.

This combination of depoliticisation and pragmatism over issues of self-definition (which is, after all, what sovereignty is about) cannot but have had an impact on the whole culture of politics in the PRC. China’s current political elite, Wang says, can be said to regard all issues now as largely technical ones, whether they relate to politics, economy, or international affairs. And governance itself in China will become a technical issue, largely concerned with the distribution of powers and resources, purged of the fierce political and ideological divisions that raged in the past, particularly during the Cultural Revolution period. That, at least, is the aspiration. The seminal event for most intellectuals of Wang’s generation, despite Wang’s attention to this period, was not the Cultural Revolution – a distant memory for most of them – but the student protests in May and June 1989 and the government crushing of them on 4 June 1989, which figure large in Wang’s account both of his intellectual growth and in the shaping of his overall approach to the dilemmas facing the PRC today. In his interpretation, 1989 was the result of previous radical marketisation from 1978 onwards and of a movement that eventually mobilised a broader array of social elements than merely the students who have ended up being most closely associated with it. In fact, it could be said the only constituency not reached by the discontent of 1989 was arguably the most important – the rural population.

Here there is a convergence with the economic data looked at by Yasheng Huang (2008) in his recent *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*. Huang argued that profound liberalisation of the agricultural sector in the 1980s led to a period of fast growth, the creation of a whole, new, non-state sector and, at least until the more urban-centred reforms started in 1986, reasonable equality. This is supported by the Gini coefficient result for the PRC, which shows that Chinese society was at its most egalitarian around 1984. But, from 1986, contention started to appear as the impact

of liberalising at least the price-mechanisms of consumerism created a dual price economy. The wealth levels of different social groups started to differ markedly. Inflation rose, corruption flourished and urban groups started to suffer. This mismanagement of the imbalances in the structures of the Chinese economy lay at the heart of the crisis of authority the CCP was to suffer into 1989, antagonised, as Deng Xiaoping himself recognised in remarks made a few days after the quelling of the students, by the international environment where the USSR was experimenting with greater economic and political openness. It was only able to reassert control by the deployment of violence and coercion.

This is an important point. We know that the policy makers, from one of the elder leaders and the most important economist in the Party elite Chen Yun downwards, created in the early 1980s a hybrid, partially marketised, partially controlled economy, where the market was embraced only up to a point, with large areas of industrial policy and production remaining with the state (it is surprising to what an extent that structure has not only survived, but in some ways has become stronger since the 1980s). Wang explains this by stating that the price controls for units and factors of production were state maintained in the 1980s, but a market for consumption opened up. The CCP's unholy, but partial, engagement with the market created a space for corruption to seep in, with officials and their acolytes flogging off state-subsidised goods on an open market. The key accusation laid at the door of the authorities was, however, not so much about corruption *per se*, but to talk the language of equality, while at the same time practising policies which were bringing in arguably unsustainable levels of inequality. Wang was personally involved in the events as they unfolded as a young academic based in Beijing at the time, and they have evidently profoundly affected him, judging from the amount of attention paid to 1989 throughout this book. The main impact, he argues, was the shattering of intellectual consensus that had existed before 1989 where there was widespread support for the way in which the Party was trying to liberalise the economy and restructure society. The broad coalition of those demonstrating against the incompetent structures of management and undermined authority of the state-party was broken by the brutal crackdown and by state coercion. Such unity has never been re-attained. The result of the CCP's hard-line reaction was to be sharper divisions in society.

Wang also makes a more contentious claim when he argues that what happened in 1989 in China served as a cause and inspiration for the final collapse of the Communist Party in the USSR. As Archie Brown (2009) in his recent *Rise and Fall of Communism* argues, the USSR carried the seeds of its own destruction for many decades before it imploded. On the surface, it is paradoxical that China, as the country that had shown the first signs of removing a Communist Party at the end of the 1980s, has, in fact, proved the most resilient. But there is no mystery about how the CCP was able to do this. In the final pages of Wang's interpretation of the meaning of 1989 for modern intellectuals and Chinese society, he argues that from 1989, though it was little noticed at the time, the state undertook an interventionist price reform programme, aiming to address some of the inequalities in the Chinese economy between urban and rural China which had been the source of some of the resentment in the build up to June 1989. Wholesale commitment to the market economy (what Wang calls "market radicalism") was not to go away. It was merely

joined by a new neo-liberal ideological justification, adapted, of course, to China's "unique" circumstances. The state, humbled a little by the demonstrations of 1989, but now firmly back under the Party's domination, started to play a "mediating role in the context of the relation between globalisation and the expansion of the domestic market" (p. 29). To achieve this, it utilised violence and agitation more. "The new market system, from 1989, with price reforms," Wang states, "was the product of political intervention, and political arrangement" (p. 36) and in this way, that system not only survived – but thrived.

The events of 1989 did not, however, resolve the profound social contradictions within Chinese society, only postponing a final reckoning. Chinese society is now as contentious as it was in the 1980s. Corruption, if it ever went away, even briefly, has made a spectacular comeback (with some claiming it accounts for as much as 12% of GDP), and inequality is on a par with the most unequal countries in Latin America. Far from 1989 being the end of history, it was, in fact, the beginning of a period of reinventing history, with Chinese intellectuals passing through three phases that Wang labels "rethinking radicalism," "market ideology" and, finally, a period since 1997 when it appears, at least on the surface, that neo-liberalism has been battling with leftism. The real fight, however, has always been over how to handle the social contradictions. In the current era, there has been debate – some of it as passionate as during the Cultural Revolution, albeit a lot more civil – about the distribution of power in China, its extensive marketisation (influence can be bought and sold here as well as anywhere else; Beijing was called by one acquaintance I knew there while serving as a British diplomat in the early 2000s as lobbying capital of the world) and the engagement through massively increased trade, the signing of a raft of free trade agreements and entry into the WTO with the global market. All of these "are intimately connected to the ... problems of modernity" (p. 66).

Novelist William Faulkner famously said that the past is never dead and not even past. Much of Wang's argument in the first part of his book is about the role of history and the understanding of that history in the construction of China's present. Modernity, and a struggle and engagement with forms of modernity from outside of China, had been a feature of this. But in an interview which takes up the middle section of this collection, Wang argues that modernity connects not only to the present, but to the future. It is the bridge between them. What form of modernity is accepted now is also laying claim to the possible futures that might happen. Modernity is very much to the fore as Wang comes to terms with one of his own books, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2004), a book which on his own reckoning was complex and densely argued. It was a work which came after a long intellectual journey: "When I began my academic career in the 1980s, China's social and political climate seemed so hopeful and free" (p. 105). In this youthful hopefulness, the West offered a kind of inspiration. But now, the focus is on China's own traditions and intellectual approaches. The West has become the god that failed.

Only a lengthy interrogation of China's intellectual currents, backwards to the Qing dynasty, was able to bring about this conviction for Wang. Drawn towards what he saw as the understanding of intellectual history more situated in its historic and social context, rather than abstract approaches favoured by academics in the philosophy departments, Wang brings forward a key theme of the second part of his book: "We cannot," Wang says, "neglect the fundamental social conditions that are

produced by intellectual activities” (p. 112). It is here that he makes his boldest, biggest and probably least tenable claims.

There is no problem with Wang’s assertion that “we not only live in these conditions but are products of this cultural and social system” (p. 115). He refers, after all, to Michel Foucault, and a great deal of Foucault’s work had been an elegant and imaginative spelling out of this proposition. But then Wang moves on to arguing that statements about China’s particularity and assertions of its uniqueness rest upon “the presumption of universality” and that recognises “the universalisation and naturalisation of the Western framework of knowledge” (p. 115). Questions immediately arise. What precisely is this “unified” Western framework? Are there not multiple strands and, for that matter, multiple Wests, in all of this? Isn’t, at some stage, truth a truth in any context, or is Wang about to argue that, as Foucault did in one of his more daring moments, truth was a “mendacious creation” excluding multiple options with a unifying epistemological tyranny? These are powerful claims to level against whatever “the West” happens to be in this particular discourse. Wang is at his best when addressing the problems of Chinese modernity and their final solution. He is not so good on general philosophy. His diagnosis of the language of modernity in contemporary China is acute and well grounded. But reaching out from this to larger claims about the “West” and “China,” and their purchase on contending claims about “truth” and universality, is highly contentious. Thankfully, he reaches back into history in sketching out an archaeology of the state in pre-modern Chinese, with the shift from pre- to post-Confucian narratives to describe this history. Wang refers to the widely held opinion that Western invasion and expansion contributed to forcing China to change and start engaging with modernity in the nineteenth century, arguing that this is a gross over-simplification, and offers a revision: “The seeds of modernity already existed.” They came from within.

This is a bold reclaiming of China’s modernity from one where it occurs as a result of a largely negative, reactive response to foreign aggression, to one where it springs with more dynamism from within Chinese society. If this is accepted, then a great deal of the conflict which modern history illustrates between China and the outside world, and the nature of China itself, is recontextualised. The “century of humiliation” which appears exhaustively in Mainland discourses of China’s development since 1840 can be recast as a century of failure on both sides to properly embed modernity within China. What Wang’s discussion does make clear is that, for many centuries, China has been something between an empire and a state, without being one or the other in the fullest sense. This complex history impacts on the PRC today, giving it a specific structure. In this sense at least, Wang is right. China needs its own framework within which to be conceptualised.

The state, and the nature of the state’s behaviour, is an issue to which Wang keeps coming back. Wang notes how closely the state is related to the production of new knowledge, setting up institutes, organisations and processes whereby knowledge is acquired, disseminated and propagated. China’s vast infrastructure of state-supported social and political science academies, along with its 2000-strong system of Party schools are only part of this. In Maoist China, huge efforts were made through education and other processes of social, epistemological and cultural control to literally remake people’s understanding of themselves. The outcomes of this vast

experiment were to be tragic, wasteful and destructive. But the attempt to manufacture new forms of knowledge and new ways of seeing things which might then prove useful continues today, and for China as it now stands, the possibilities are rich. In technical innovation, the creation of a new polity and, most importantly, in the construction of a new kind of cultural and social space, China wishes to accelerate past modernity and to claim the future in ways that Wang outlines in this book. That necessarily involves more than just administrative or legal changes:

The debates about the WTO [which had largely happened outside, rather than within China, to Wang's regret] profoundly reflect the necessity for freedom of speech and public discussion. At the same time, the emergence of the WTO and other important social questions have presented new challenges to intellectuals struggle for the right to free speech; in light of the extremely complex contemporary social situation, the struggle for freedom of speech and of the press must be located within the historical horizon of broader democratic demands, from which would arise a much tighter connection between the demands for constitutional rights . . . and demands by other social strata and social movements. The crux of the problem here is that, in order to obstruct the monopolization of benefits by special interest factions and the re-feudalisation of the public sphere, we must in actual practice expand our social space of activity (p. 62).

Wang's essays are rich in theoretical detail and draw from diverse sources. They are motivated by a clear-sighted intellectual self-honesty. In his memorial essay to the young writer, social activist and environmentalist Xiao Liangzhong, who died in 2005, it is clear that Wang appreciates the quality of intellectual integrity in others. The appearance of these essays in English gives the opportunity for non-Chinese readers to appreciate some of the issues of, and the influences on, one of the most important contemporary Chinese thinkers. While inevitably Wang doesn't quite succeed in nailing down finally what the unique Chinese form of modernity is, beyond the modernities that have already been tried and failed, he does at least make a compelling case for some aspects of this complex, and elusive, particularity which lingers about China whenever it is spoken about and discussed. That at least gets us somewhere closer to where we need to go.

References

- Brown, A. (2009) *Rise and Fall of Communism*, London: Bodley Head.
 Wang Hui (2004) *Xiandai Zhongguo Sixiang de Xingqi* [The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought], Beijing: Shenghuo, Dushu, Xinzhi San Lian Shu Dian.
 Yasheng Huang (2008) *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.