

The Historian's Gaze

Essays on Modern and Contemporary China
in Honour of Guido Samarani

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What is 'Modern' China? Desperately Seeking for 'a' Birthday

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Abstract Historians have been obsessed with pinpointing the birth of modern China. However, what do we (historians) look for when we try to trace its birth? And more importantly, how do we understand the term 'modern' and by extension 'modernity'? Has its meaning changed over time? This essay addresses these problems by focussing on two main aspects. The first aspect concerns Chinese modernity in relation to historians' subjectivity and periodisation. The concept of modern and modernity is not set in stone and what is modern depends on who is asking the question, with context, nationality/ethnicity and gender accounting for historians' subjectivity. One should also take into account that new perspectives are gained due to the passage of time and the concept of what makes China modern at any given point shifts accordingly. The second aspect is the nation- and state-building process. The changing relationship between the individual and the state seems a good vantage point from which to explore modernity. From citizenship to mass politics, the essay draws on different examples to illustrate the main trends that emerged and bedded in during the Republican period, and beyond, and explain why we might (or might not) consider them markers of modernity.

Keywords Hybrid modernities. Subjectivity. Periodisation. Nation and state-building. Modern citizen.

Summary 1 Historians' Subjectivity and Chinese Modernity. – 2 The Individual and the Modern State. – 3 Conclusions.

For many years, historians have credited the interaction with the West for the momentous changes that took place in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The discussion of the colonial input in China's modernity, or any other country for that matter, is not a moot debate; to this day 'colonial modernity' and 'modernity' are often considered



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interchangeable concepts, and this approach encompasses the whole of Asian history.¹ Cohen's China-centred history marked a paradigmatic shift and paved the way for the analysis of the multiple factors and causes contributing to underpinning China's experience of imperialism (Cohen 2010). The same goes for other Asian countries. Stephens noted that the association of Korean modernity with Japanese colonialism and the periodisation of the Chosŏn era promoted a unilateral idea of modernisation process divorced from locality, and this could not be further from reality, as the "precolonial reform projects" were instrumental to the Japanese colonial building (Stephens 2019, 111). Furthermore, the association of colonialism with modernity skewed the historiographical debate since "the collective focus on modernity has arguably limited the scope of historical enquiry to topics that fit within chosen definitions of modernity" (110).

Historians have also reframed the approach to Asia's treaty ports history. Considered outposts of colonial powers and proof of the asymmetrical relation between foreign countries and those upon which the opening of ports was imposed, recent historiography has convincingly researched the links among Asian treaty ports, the development of indigenous trade networks, for example frontier trade, and, more broadly, previously overlooked relationships across Asia (Hamashita 2001; Murakami 2013; Lin 2017; Stephens 2019). Hamashita argued that between 1830 and the 1890s Asia experienced an "era of negotiation" (2001, 59). He focussed on the intra-Asian relationship among the treaty ports (treaty port diplomacy) and considered it distinct from Western diplomacy's bilateral framework: for instance, China and Korea harmonised treaty port trade with existing tribute trade and internal and frontier trade. Hence, a multilateral approach to treaty port Asia unveiled interconnected dynamics and recast the relationship between modernity and colonialism (Hamashita 2001, 60, 63, 65-74, 82).²

As for Chinese modernity, historians have long been obsessed with pinpointing the birth of modern China. However, what do we (historians) look for when we try and trace its birth? And more importantly, how do we understand the term 'modern' and by extension 'modernity'? Has its meaning changed over time? These questions are long-standing, but there are reasons why we should keep asking them: modernity is a fluid and mutable concept, hence it requires to be redefined by each generation of historians; in addition, the way

1 The interest in colonial modernity was piqued by the readings done in preparation for the online workshop organised by Drs Tsai Weipin (Royal Holloway, UK) and Donna Brunero (National University of Singapore) on 17 September 2021 on trade and tariffs in Asia. The Author would like to thank the organisers and the participants for the inspirational discussion.

2 See also Cohen 2010, XLV-XLVI for a discussion of Hamashita's argument.

in which these very questions are answered tells a great deal about the historians' approach to Chinese history. Modernity, understood as a drive towards something 'other', was the result of a process of hybridisation, in which assimilation, interpretation and readaptation all cohabited. This is not to say that the relationship with the 'West' was not significant; however, the concept of 'hybrid modernities' (intentional plural), is a better fit for encompassing China's history and its foreign interactions.³

This essay addresses these conundrums by discussing two modernity-related issues: historians' subjectivity in studying Chinese modernity, and the modern state and the individual. The first part explores Chinese modernity in relation to historians' subjectivity and the use of periodisation. It argues that the concept of modern and modernity is not set in stone and what is modern depends on who is asking the question with context, nationality and/or ethnicity, and gender accounting for the historians' subjectivity. Knowing when and where this question is asked is also essential; as new perspectives are gained due to the passing of time, the concept of what makes China modern at any given point shifts accordingly. In addition, Chinese contemporaries may entertain ideas of modernity specific to the geographical area in which they live and work. The most obvious differentiation is between urban and rural areas, but here I shall use the concepts of 'peripheral' and 'rural' modernities to highlight the complexities of modernity.

The second part discusses modernity from the vantage point of the nation- and the state-building process, more specifically, the changing relationship between the individual and the state from citizenship to mass politics. In China, the enduring presence of these themes across different times and political regimes attest to this topic's significance. The essay draws on examples and illustrates the main dynamics that developed and bedded in during the Republican period, and explains why we might, or might not, consider these experiences markers of modernity.

The essay concludes that the discovery of modern China is an invention. Just like the discovery of America by Colombo was a non-discovery, because America had been there all along, Chinese modernity is the result of modernities and indigenous values shaped by the interactions with the rest of Asia, and countries west of China. Interrogating ourselves about modernity's building blocks in Asia in the age of colonialism and post-colonialism helps probing and resisting the lures of periodisation. Equally, at a time when China's

3 I came up with this term independently, but I do not claim to have coined it. A quick search returned two monographs which use this concept, and both focus on the relationship between architecture and colonialism: Morton 2000; Padua 2020.

movements across East Asia and Southeast Asia are watchfully scrutinised by both China's neighbours and countries far afield, the experience of the past can shed light on current attitudes, perceptions, and overtones.

1 Historians' Subjectivity and Chinese Modernity

What do historians have in mind when we try and trace the birth of modern China? And more importantly: what do we mean when we use the term 'modern' (Wenlin 4.0, 2011)?⁴ The answer could be the same of 'what is beauty?', with beauty being 'in the eye of the beholder'. In other words, we are mindful of personal inclinations and preferences to define beauty, and even though we might disagree on the degree of beauty of an object or a person, there is ordinarily some collective consensus because time and cultural influences are key factors in reaching a definition. Nonetheless, even though we might reach consensus of what is modern and modernity at a specific point in time, definitions do vary.

The perception of modernity as an ever-changing concept is predicated on the diversity and subjectivity of the historical debates: what historians might consider modern and where they would place the birth of modern China are all subjective matters. Questions about modernity are worth asking because they prompt historians to come up with a definition and the more definitions we have, the more nuanced and aware we become. Historians are shaped by the social context in which they conduct themselves as individuals and develop and articulate their ideas, and so does their concept of modernity. 'My' idea of China's modernity was influenced by my upbringing in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, my life experience and perhaps gender. When my interest in modern Chinese history developed, I was acutely aware of Italy's similarities with China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: it was mostly an agrarian economy characterised by so-called 'delayed industrialisation' process and strong social and nationalist movements. It is a possibility that my interest in state- and nation-building, as well as mass mobilisation, developed from a familiarity with these topics.

⁴ The etymology of 'modern' in Chinese is a tell-tale sign of the nuances embedded in the word: "modern [ˈmʊdərən] 1. xiàndài de 现代的; jìndài de 近代的 现代的 xiàndài de 现代的; jìndài de 近代的; jìndài de xiàndài de 现代的; jìndài de 近代的 xiàndài de 现代的; jìndài de 近代的 xiàndài de 现代的; jìndài de 近代的 2. xīnshì de 新式的; shí máo de 时髦的 fashionable; mó dēng 摩登 <loan> modern; fashionable" (Wenlin 4.0, 2011). The analogy 'modern-fashionable' is fascinating: what is fashionable at a certain point in time is usually new, and what is new is more often than not considered modern, particularly by young people whom by definition have a shorter historical memory.

The influence of time and cultural trends should also be considered. Historians tend to ask similar questions and historical interpretations rise and swirl. For instance, in the 1990s the topics of state-building, civil society, nationalism, and internationalisation became key research areas (Wakeman 1993). Very likely, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the widespread application of the World Wide Web enhanced our perception of interconnectedness and globalisation. In the 1990s, the debate about Chinese modernisation during the Republican period was all the rage and the book *China's Quest for Modernization: A Historical Perspective* (Wakeman, Wang 1997) marked an important development for two reasons: first, it made clear that modernisation could only be understood and defined in 'historical perspective' and by encompassing a breadth of topics; and second, that the chronology of modernisation was comprehensive of late imperial China. In other words, it would be unwise to try and single-out Republican China as the cradle of modernity, and continuities across time and space may be more useful indicators for exploring modernity.

However, relinquishing periodisation is not that straightforward, and would that be even a wise move? Periodisation is a necessary evil whose pitfalls are well understood, but there are also gains to be made from it. How we divide up and designate time-periods is a convention often shaped by whom is in power. The one-party state system complicated matters further in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan, but in essence power and periodisation go hand in hand everywhere. Periodisation prompts historians to question who was driving what narratives for the period they examine and why. It is this kind of approach that ultimately makes a more nuanced understanding of history possible. For instance, the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Communists articulated their notions of the state *vis-à-vis* modernity, and so did the late Qing's government. If one would like to have the measure of the process entailing the crafting of the modern state, then this purpose would be best served by exploring the topic across different time-periods: the continuities between the late Qing state, its reforms, and the Republic are a case in point (Horowitz 2003). On the other hand, we must be conscious that the political parties and governments neither represented faithfully, nor summed up attitudes towards modernities across the whole of China. To account for that, we should examine the relationship between geography and modernity.

Understanding Chinese modernity is intimately connected to its geography. Chinese cities have been at the centre of historical enquiry, with Shanghai being considered the torchbearer for modernity. However, there is more to Chinese cities than the treaty ports and capitals (Nanjing and Beijing) and we should root for the 'not-so-cool' cities. In addition, change did not stop at the city walls and there is a case to be made for granting rural modernity equal standing. Approaching

modernity by framing these three geographical points of contact on the one hand enables us to showcase diversity, and on the other sets the stage for the exploration of individual modernity in the next section.

Shanghai was the crucible for Chinese and foreign modernities. It was a treaty port risen from humble beginnings, where multiple forces were at play and moved fast during the late Qing period and Republican China: trade and commerce, the interaction between Chinese and foreign businesses, workers from the rural areas, printing business, transportation, schools and universities, and new trends in consumption and culture, just to name but a few. Shanghai modernity, Yeh argued, was the result of a unique mix which was specific to this city and different from the rest of China (Yeh 1997). For this reason, Shanghai cannot speak for the rest of China and the exploration of the not-quite-so glamorous cities would certainly yield different conclusions, but how so?

Cities such as Nanchang and Lanzhou show that various modernities were in action and proceeded at different speeds. In Nanchang, the provincial capital of Jiangxi province, changes to the urban landscape and transportation came thick and fast after the establishment of the Nanjing government. Specific political developments facilitated urban regeneration projects: from mid to late 1927, the province became the hiding site for the Communists and further down the line, in 1931, the headquarters of the First Chinese Soviet Republic. Chiang Kai-shek moved its military headquarters to Nanchang in the early 1930s and this presence changed both urban dynamics and landscape: the reorganisation of the city-planning and the upgrade of sanitation and transportation were certainly linked to Chiang's presence in town (Ferlanti 2013). Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu province in the northwest of China, was more remote than Nanchang geographically and, around the same time, it experienced large-scale changes. Peripheral cities, according to Strand, were in fact nodal points of exchange based on ongoing relationships among cities of different sizes and importance, and challenged the dichotomy of local vs global and rural vs urban. For instance, the employment of urban planners, engineers, bureaucrats matched the expansion of the state through "the import of new technologies and organizational forms" (Strand 2000, 107-8, 125). These middle-ranking urban centres demonstrate that diverse experiences of modernities existed. They proceeded at different speed depending on the set of local conditions, geographical or otherwise, and all together produced unique blends of modernity. Nonetheless, these phenomena were interconnected. To begin with, Shanghai modernity was not bottled up and one-sided, and ramifications across urban and rural China could be traced through the movement of people, such as migrant workers, and the circulation of ideas through newspapers and periodicals printed in the city (Yeh 2000, 1-16). Dynamics whose beneficial effects,

incidentally, current insular policy-makers across the world seem to be ignorant of. In other words, modernity and interconnectivity were features of rural China too.

Far from being cut off from the changes that were shaking and stirring cities small and large, rural China was not a passive recipient of the transformations taking place elsewhere, but took them in, readapted and ultimately shared them out again. In addition, the exchange went in both directions. China's rural revolution is a classic example of just that: long before the Nationalists and the Communists cast eye on the revolutionary potential of the rural masses with the Nationalist Party's Peasant Movement Training Institute and Peng Pai's Hailufeng Soviet in the 1920s, the countryside had experienced collective organised protests and violent takeovers. Indeed, some of these were linked to developments far afield, such as the changes in the economy in the South of China, the wider circulation of goods beyond the treaty ports and foreign ideas; but others were rooted in local circumstances, for instance, the scarcity of good land to till during the late Qing period which combined with loosely Christian-inspired ideas produced the Taiping rebellion (Gao 2016; Thaxton 1997; Wakeman 1997; Rowe 2009). One could argue that Communism, a foreign import, by spreading to the rural areas delivered cultural, social and economic modernities, but the process was by its very nature fragmented and so were the modernities that travelled with it. Communism took hold, when and where it did, through a process of sifting and adaption in which the peasants and local society partook. The analysis of the Land Law in 1931, the Land Investigation Movement in 1933-34, and the land policy during the Yan'an period reveals that each of them marks different approaches to the land question. These were not based on academic discussions, but had to take into consideration multiple actors' responses (as social classes and individuals), not to mention the local geography and economy. For example, the relative tolerance towards the middle peasants shown in 1931, at the dawn of the soviet experience in Jiangxi, was eroded by the acceleration of the land confiscation and fines imposed throughout 1933-34, and then rural policies were remodulated during the Yan'an period, after the fall of the Central Soviet and under the changed circumstances of the war against Japan (Schram 1992, 822-5; Saich, Yang 1994, 602-3; Goodman 2000). The Communist revolution stretched long and wide, and through cycles of indigenisation, it scattered many modernities across China.

Two considerations follow from the above. The first would be that the divide between modern and traditional pertaining to urban and rural China is artificial and often dismissive of the latter's capacity to generate its own blend of modernity. The second would be that the dynamic relationship between urban and rural China, and the liminal spaces in between neither rural nor urban, could be approached more

beneficially from the perspective of 'networks of modernity'. Just like highways and local roads, there were pathways of modernities that criss-crossed the country at different speed and degree of traffic, resulting in several combinations. Through local histories, historians can map these pathways and explore points of contact, and in turn can achieve a more thorough understanding of modernity. This approach, however, is not without its drawbacks, namely the analysis of places and communities risks obscuring individual experiences. The next section tries to address this issue by focussing on individual modernity, and does so by exploring the relationship between the individual and the modern state.

2 The Individual and the Modern State

Historians did not invent the concept of Chinese modernity. Chinese contemporaries grappled with this same issue and analysed and debated at length modernity and China's path to modernisation. Arguably, what Chinese citizens perceived as being modern in the early Republican period was as subjective as the historians' approaches. But contemporaries' perception of social changes and attitudes can bring us closer to defining Chinese modernity, and much can be understood by observing what they embraced, resisted, or left them nonplussed.

Nation- and state-building and individual interactions with the state are central themes of modern China. The latter was an integral part of dynastic China too, but we can concur that the shift from the imperial subject to the Republican citizen was momentous and was perceived as an ingress into modern China. However, was it radical or even unforeseen? Not quite so. The act of becoming modern was not like turning a tap on and off and was nurtured by ideas and practices all vying for attention and not necessarily new, which then became prevalent depending on the context. As for the individual, debates over the concept of 'citizenship' and what meant to be and become a modern citizen evolved over time and certainly we cannot simply credit the Republic for it.

Liang Qichao's essays about the "new citizen", his rethinking of the empire as a "citizen-state" and his definition of "the legitimate role of *si* [the individual] as the basic of civic participation" (Zarrow 2012, 76-7) give the sense of the depth of intellectual and political change that was taking place before the Republic came into being. These concepts stemmed from an intellectual debate whose scholarly roots were planted deeply into the imperial system and radical Confucianism (Zarrow 2005, 12-29). It was not a lofty debate, and Liang's understanding of the new citizen was more practical than philosophical, as Fung, following in Zarrow's footsteps, explained:

[Liang's] new citizens (*xin min*) were not subjects or commoners but people exercising rights, especially the right of political participation. [...] His new citizens were empowered as members of a political community and organic society, with a consciousness of their rights, actively participating in the determination of China's destiny in an age of imperialism and in a world of competing nation-states. (Fung 2006, 456-7)

Hence, the new citizen required a nation-state, or as Liang noted a "citizen-state" (Zarrow 2012, 76-7), in which the right of political participation would be recognised. It follows that the nation (or citizen-state) could not exist without the new citizen and the seeds of the modern state were planted long before the Republic.

The newly established Republic, however, can be credited for unleashing the new citizen and modern citizenship's potential. State-building and education were chosen channels for achieving such an outcome, and the attempt of teaching modern citizenship was systematic during the Republican period (Culp 2007). In 1912 Cai Yuanpei, in his capacity of Minister of Education, explained how education could shape Chinese citizens. He concluded that China needed both a "military education for citizens" and a "moral education for citizens [...] because strong neighbours are all oppressing us, we have to plan hastily for self-protection"; also, "after a revolution by the militarists, it is hard to guarantee that there will not be a period when the militarists will wield political power" (Teng, Fairbank 1954, 235-6). The "military education for citizens", Cai admitted, was a legacy of the Qing dynasty, but given the international situation it could not be disregarded; it combined Confucian ethical principles with the principles that had inspired the French Revolution (235-6). Even though Cai's Republican ideas of citizenship were articulated through traditional practices and values, the resulting values were not necessarily at odds with modernity.

Both Liang and Cai's ideas show that discussions about the citizen cannot be separated from the context in which the citizen conducted itself. Despite the patent continuities with the past, the Republic set a novel direction of travel, and during the early years the nation- and state-building process proceeded almost hand in hand. One could consider Yuan Shikai's state-building efforts confined only to the state, however it was the state that oversaw the shaping up of citizens. The "making of the Republican citizen" was a long process that was kept on the state agenda for many years to come, and the objective was to mould a citizen that would identify with and be loyal to the new state (Harrison 2000). Even if these phenomena were not necessarily original, the nation- and the state-building process, and the citizens' education and modernity came together in the early years of the Republic.

It was in the interaction between the modern state and the individual that collective and individual modernities interfaced. The Republic was the outcome of a revolution, the Xinhai Revolution, and chronologically the beginning of a new era. In addition, the state fostered the idea that the Republic was a break with the past and promoted modern attitudes and behaviours across Chinese politics and society. Some were superficial, others more consequential: pictures of the Nanjing Provisional Government show officials sporting short hair and western clothing at its inauguration (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Jiangsu weiyuanhui banggongting* 2001, 62), and citizens attended public ceremonies to celebrate the newly minted Republic with a National Day on the Double Tenth (Harrison 2000, 49-91). The use of national flags in public ceremonies and schools, and the sharing of behaviours, such as social etiquette with modern greetings and customs such as clothing, came to define the Republican citizen and were identified as markers of modernity (Harrison 2000, 49-91). The extent to which the change of regime and fashion statements of officials were genuine markers of modernity is another matter, as we ought to differentiate between perception, representation and conforming with the latest fashion. Nonetheless, to the wider population who were neither involved in the decision-making process nor acquainted with intellectual debates about the modern citizen, the sight of compatriots who were wearing unfamiliar clothes and changed flags at ceremonies was indeed a new spectacle. Public displays and official ceremonies were also in line with the reconfiguration of the public space, which was influenced by the ways space was planned by municipal administrations or spontaneously assigned to specific uses (e.g. parks, factories, and the Bund, to name a few), and the new ways in which it was enjoyed by the citizens (Tsin 1999). In other words, modernity went beyond the act of building the state and adopting national symbols, and promoted behavioural changes while reconfiguring the space the individuals inhabited. But how did collective perceptions of modernity and expectations of (some) individuals manage to form and circulate across Chinese society and beyond urban China? The answer, historians argue, is through education.

Education in the Republican period was instrumental in articulating contemporary notions of modernity. The debate about modern education fed from a multitude of contributors and the introduction of modern curricula in schools across China and in rural areas affected attitudes towards change and seeded the notion of modernity beyond school gates. Historians have written extensively about the implications of the overhaul of post-1912 Chinese education for the nation and state-building project, and for students and women (Culp 2007; VanderVen 2012; Bailey 2007). A crucial aspect was also the widening access to the profession of teachers and the expansion of rural

schools, all of which contributed to disseminating ideas of modernity across China for over three decades (Liu 2009; Cong 2007). The setting up of normal schools and colleges eased late Qing licentiates and higher degree holders into the teaching profession, as they were given preference in the application process, or were selected specifically by the new school system introduced between 1902 and 1905 (Cong 2007, 38-9, 44). Furthermore, the intake of a younger generation, who had been trained in the new school system since the late Qing period, and the expansion of the rural school networks consolidated modern curricula and contributed to the spreading of revolutionary ideas at county level and below (Averill 1987, 285-6; 2007, 14-16). Over time, the propagation of schools in rural areas widened the access to education for students and teachers of rural origins, a trend that grew during the late 1920s and 1930s (Liu 2009, 577-9, 584-5). Basically, not only did the progressive overhaul of education driven by the literate élites change the educational system and promoted social mobility, but also popularised ideas and perceptions of modernity across China. This is not to say that these ideas bedded in the system homogeneously, as time and geography must be also considered.

The perception of modernity by contemporaries is hugely significant for defining modernity. For instance, although the historiography has long dismissed the idea of the May Fourth mobilisation as the starting point for Chinese modernity, it was instantly credited with marking the birth of modern China. Its association with modernity was perhaps so pervasive, I suggest, also because it projected an idea of modernity and behaviours that foreigners were familiar with. John Dewey, the reputed academic, philosopher and educationist, on witnessing the ongoing student protests in Beijing in June 1919 remarked the novelty of girls' participation in the street protests and argued that "we are witnessing the birth of a nation" (Dewey, Dewey 1920, 7). But how were the 1919 student protests different from the rallies and boycotts which took place across China between January and June 1915 in response to the Twenty-One Demands from Japan? In 1915, overseas and Chinese students, citizens' associations, Chambers of Commerce, shopkeepers etc., all took to the streets and carried out boycotts of Japanese goods, and one can even observe the setting up of a National Salvation Fund in Shanghai supported by business and bankers (Luo 1993, 297-309). Why were those protests not sufficiently 'modern' and 'national'? On what grounds can one take the position that 1915, to paraphrase Dewey's words, did not mark the birth of modern China?

There are in fact no grounds, unless we reason that perhaps the May Fourth Incident and the generation that came to be defined by it were on the winning side and had the chance to tell the story and to do so very loudly from 1949 onwards. This is not to say that the story they told was unsound, but it is worth noting that the May Fourth generation

of revolutionaries who entered the domain of mass politics by joining the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party would not have been able to achieve as much as they did without the spadework of the preceding generation, the late-Qing generation (Ferlanti 2020). The historiography has come to a nuanced appraisal which compensates the Chinese Communist Party's narrative of the May Fourth Movement. However, its enduring prominence reinforces the idea that the birth of modern China is to be found in the Republican period.

3 Conclusions

This essay has explored the many ways in which historians and Chinese contemporaries understood and articulated Chinese modernity. It argues that the concept of Chinese modernity is an invention predicated on the sum of historical subjectivities and contemporaries' experiences of modernity. I drew attention, instead, to the existence of many and often competing modernities which developed across China, and argued that concepts such as 'hybrid', 'peripheral' and 'rural' modernities are a better fit to define the relationship between China and modernity during the Republican period. While Republican China encompassed individuals and society whose behaviours, interactions and characteristics we may regard as modern, choosing the Republic's establishment to mark the birthday of the modern state is tricky: we are aware of how things ended up with Sun Yat-sen handing over the Republic to Yuan Shikai, a remarkably non-modern looking leader, and the Republic ceasing to function as a national institution in the space of just a few years. To these days, the outset of the Republic is generally dealt with quickly by historians, and the birth of modern China is often associated with the 1919 May Fourth Incident and Movement. What we can perhaps agree upon is that the debates and dynamics that characterised the late nineteenth century and the early Republican period, the May Fourth Movement, the Northern Expedition, China and the West, and the Nationalist and the Communist revolutions etc., each embodied multiple modernities which originated and developed in different places and reached across China and beyond.

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