

Innocence Lost

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Kurt Werner Radtke/Tony Saich (Eds.). *China's Modernization: Westernization and Acculturation*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993.

Reading the title and the subtitle of this book leads to a certain uneasiness, and I do not think this just indicates a particular idiosyncrasy of the writer of this review alone. In fact, I am quite confident in this point, and the reason for my confidence will become obvious below.

Looking more closely, I think the uneasiness I am trying to talk about here appears when proceeding from the title to the subtitle. There is of course nothing wrong with this subtitle. Only something seems to be missing, something we expect, and perhaps only subliminally, but something we do expect to follow when reading the term *Modernization*. It is not easy to say what it is. *Modernization*, the key term of the title, is specified by two other terms: *Westernization* and *Acculturation*. So we learn how the term is supposed to be meant here and how the topic indicated by the term is supposed to be addressed. China's *Modernization* is understood and will be discussed in the book as a process of *Westernization* and *Acculturation*. What is missing? Of course we could say that these terms need some specification too, but there is no space for further specifications in a subtitle. Specifying a term from the title by two others in a subtitle is common practice. Further details would belong in the introduction. Where, then, does our uneasiness come from? Do we perhaps expect too much from the front page of the book? Are we perhaps not patient enough? Should we not try to keep back

our expectations and to open up our mind to what the book is telling us instead of comparing the text with our expectations? Are we perhaps just bad readers? This is a serious question. So we start again.

The title of the book is *China's Modernization*. We may say that any author or editor has the freedom to address what he likes under a given title. What we can expect just is that he or she is telling us his or her intention in a subtitle. So we should not have any expectations at all before reading the subtitle. Expectations, disappointed by a subtitle, would necessarily be inadequate expectations, the product of bad reading.

Very often this may be so, but not always. The freedom of an author in the way of addressing his or her topic is only then unlimited, if the major term or terms of his or her title still can be used with a certain innocence. Innocent terms are those not intrinsically linked with questions, problems, conflicts. To say it the other way round: Reading a term that has lost its innocence is like getting involved in a battle. There is no observer position any more. Reading the term, we immediately expect some reference to the battle and some indication of a position within that battle. Holding back this expectation would mean treating the term like an innocent one. This would be bad reading. If the term is part of a title, we cannot grant the author the freedom of ignoring our expectation in his subtitle. At least we have every right to feel disappointed if he or she does so.

Of course it may always be a matter of dispute whether or not a particular term indeed has lost its innocence. As far as the term *modern* is concerned, there will hardly be any doubt that the times have gone when this term was generally associated with change towards the better in every possible respect, thus signifying an undisputed and indeed hardly disputable value. For some time, changes characterized as *Modernization* were experienced as, or expected to be, changes

towards the better. *Modernization*, therefore, came to be identified with change towards the better. In the meantime, some of the changes considered as *Modernizations* turned out to be disastrous. There are two options in response to this experience. Either we say: It was wrong to characterize those disastrous changes as *Modernizations*. They were one-sided, blind-eyed, stopping half way. Real *Modernization* would not lead to disasters. What would *real Modernization* be, however? Or we say: *Modernization* is not necessarily change towards the better. It is a particular strategy of managing, structuring, bringing about change, and the results of this strategy may or may not turn out to be real improvements. However, what are *real* improvements? And, apart from that: Would it not be counterintuitive to characterize something as a real improvement without characterizing it as well as a *modern* achievement? With these few remarks on the term *Modernization* we are already involved in a debate. Whole bibliographies could be quoted to back up each one of the two options mentioned, and to present other options in between. There is no way of making use of the term without getting involved in this debate. *Modernization* certainly is not an innocent term any more.

Prepared to mark the retirement of E. Zürcher from the *Sinologisch Instituut* at Leiden University, the book includes eight contributions on very different issues. It is not possible in this review to discuss each individual paper, although it would certainly be worth it. For further reference, authors and titles of all contributions in the sequence as they appear in the book should at least be mentioned: Kurt Werner Radtke, "Troubled Identity"; Flemming Christiansen, "Zhang Jian's *Bianfa Pingyi* -- A Place for Gradual Reform in Late Imperial and Early Republican China?"; Tony Saich, "Interpreting China: The Case of Maring"; Leo Douw, "Chinese Rural Sociology in the 30s: On the Acculturation of Social Scientists' Political Attitudes"; Woei Lien Chong, "The Tragic Duality of

Man: Liu Xiaobo on Western Philosophy from Kant to Sartre"; Frank N. Pieke, "The 1989 People's Movement: Dramatization and Ritualization of Political Action"; Stefan R. Landsberger, "A Chinese Future with Western Characteristics: Chinese Visual Propaganda During the 'Four Modernizations' (1978-1988)."

At the beginning of his introduction to the whole book, Kurt Werner Radtke is telling us that he plans to work out the links between these contributions. He mentions some of the topics, and then he writes:

The aim of most authors is not only to describe cultural interaction and acculturation, the main theme suggested by the title of this book. A common theme underlying most contributions may be entitled 'in search of meaning' (p.1).

This is a very interesting remark indeed, and at this point I am finally coming back to my confidence that I am not alone with my uneasiness. Radtke assumes that we are having certain expectations after having read the title, and he is telling us right away that these expectations are too limited. What does he assume we are expecting? A description of cultural interaction and acculturation in China. In the title we do not find the word *description*. Why should we expect what Radtke assumes we expect? Although there certainly are many books offering descriptions of all kinds of things, we hardly find the word *description* in the title of any book. How do we know a particular book indeed is describing something, if its title does not tell us? The title may tell us, but without using the word *description*. This is the crucial point. Reading a title like *Taiwan: A Booming Book Market*, we do expect a description of the book market in Taiwan. There seem to be tacit conventions telling us whether or not to expect a description. However, under no circumstances do we expect a

description when the title includes a term that has lost its innocence. Reading a title like *Classical Greek in Contemporary Germany* we will expect more than just a description of a state of affairs. The term *Classical Greek* is not an innocent term any more. Perhaps it never was. Making use of it, we are immediately involved in a debate on the relevancy of Greek studies, on the implications of reading or not reading Greek for other subjects etc. As Radtke assumes we expect a description after having read the title *China's Modernization: Westernization and Acculturation*, he seems to feel that there is some tacit convention in this title that will lead us to such an expectation, and he does not seem to feel that there is any word in this title that might undermine this convention.

We may ask, why did the authors not just deliver in their contributions what the title seems to suggest? What made them pursue more than was expected, and more than we are assumed to be expecting, thus leading to the necessity of correcting our expectations in the introduction? Most authors, I feel, just would answer that a mere description was impossible, that any attempt at discussing aspects of China's *Modernization* requires a particular strategy of "making sense", which means that there cannot be a anything like a mere description of China's *Modernization*. If the title of this book indeed were suggesting what Radtke assumes it to be suggesting to us, this would be the title of a book that could never be written any more under the present circumstances. We feel that the main title is suggesting something else. At this point in our reading, however, we do not know yet what we will get. Between the main title and the book still lies the subtitle. Reading the subtitle, we hesitate. In this conjunction of two nouns a convention seems to be hidden that is strongly enforcing an inclination to expect a description in spite of everything. Due to the lost innocence of the term *Modernization*, we are immune against the force of this convention. Our expectations remain unchanged. We worry, however, that we

might have misunderstood the main title and that the title as a whole might really mean what the subtitle seems to be suggesting. The author of the introduction seems to be worried too. *He* assumes that *we* understand the title precisely in the way we are worrying that the title might be meant. That is why he has to start his introduction with an attempt at correcting our expectations.

The first paper, written by the same author as the introduction, may help us to read this rather tangled relation between title, subtitle, introduction and the whole book as a symptom. Radtke's focus is the problem of identity, and he is discussing this problem by challenging the inertia of a standard framework of "making sense". The framework under attack is taking for granted that there is something like *the East* and *the West*, and that the confrontation of the East with the West triggered processes of change that created the problem of how to preserve the identity of *the East* in spite of *Westernization*. To highlight the direction of Radtke's well documented argument, we may reflect for a moment on the term *Westernization* itself. This is a very common, a very familiar term, but its implications are everything but a matter of course. When we are making use of the term, we are talking about habits, lifestyles, sensibilities, ways of thinking in *the East*, and we mean to say that they are not really *Eastern* any more. *The East* has been changing, *the East* is now the *Westernized East*. Logically and grammatically this implies that there still is something like *the East*, only with *Western* characteristics. What is at work here clearly is the categorical frame of an enduring substance with changing characteristics. Precisely this, however, is highly problematic in this context. What would be the essence corresponding to the enduring Eastern substance in spite of *Westernization*? Which characteristics would be the essential ones of a *Westernized East*? It is hard to see how we could treat characteristics that are "looking *Western*" as essential characteristics of the enduring

substance of *the East*. Treating these characteristics as non-essential, on the other hand, we are forced to understand a wide range of phenomena we actually find in *the East* as ephemeral, as a mere surface hiding the essential and enduring. This is not just an academic problem. Making use of the pattern of interpretation under discussion here can literally lead to a repression or even self-repression of a developing identity. The reason for that is a neglect of the category of *Nativity* so much emphasized by Hannah Arendt.

Bringing into play the category of *Nativity*, we are in a position to see and to appreciate every newly born child as a real beginning. In his or her life, it will not only reaffirm and represent the essential characteristics of the culture it has been born into, it will and will have to reformulate and redefine what these characteristics are. What may have been nonessential aspects of that culture when it was born may become essential ones. It does not make much sense, therefore, to apply the concept of an enduring substances to a culture.

Without explicitly using the term, Radtke is making use of the category of *Nativity* when he writes that

. . . both present-day China and Japan can perhaps be better described as 'new' entities, the children of a native mother and a foreign father; perhaps closer to the mother, the new child is the property of neither parent, in search of its own identity (p.19).

Giving the concept of *Nativity* its due and dropping the idea of an enduring substance, there is no conflict between change and identity any more. Cultures do not face any problem of identity, in fact they do not face any problem at all, because cultures are not subjects. Instead, every generation born into a given culture faces the problem of identity. Solving this problem means absorbing, weaving together and transforming what is there in a creative way. From the perspective of the

previous generation, the solution every new generation is up to will always look eclectic. This cannot be otherwise. *What is there* is always different, and a strategy of exclusion would certainly be the worst possible strategy of building an identity. In this sense, the terms *Westernization* or *Westernized* belong to the perspective of the past. Making use of them means taking the past as a perspective to look at and to characterize the present.

Coming back from here to our problem with the title of the book, I have the impression that our uneasiness is reflecting the awareness that the only language and vocabulary we have to talk about the so called East is largely inadequate. As long as the term *Modernization* could be used in an innocent way, this inadequacy was not so obvious. *Modernization*, in its innocent use, signified a universal standard of judging and characterizing cultural change. With this innocence gone, we realize that the impression of adequacy we obviously once had when discussing *the East* in our familiar vocabulary has gone too. And precisely this is the problem the papers in this book are concerned with. In Radtke's introduction we read:

The interaction between China and other countries cannot be merely described as a complex process of reception in which conceptual differences between foreign languages and Chinese play an important role. The foreign writers find themselves in the same role as the Chinese intellectuals and actors they describe. Confronted with phenomena that look both Chinese and foreign (Western), they search for new ways to attach (scientific) meaning to these events. They look at events through the eyes of various disciplines: history, philosophy, the social sciences, and the visual arts (p.1).

There is no space in this review to discuss in detail the point

Radtke is making in the first part of this quote. Some remarks may be sufficient to highlight the relevance of this point.

The actors, as Radtke is putting it, and the "foreign writers," the scholars trying to understand what is going on in China, are in the same role. Of course they are not in the same role in every respect. What they have in common is the experience that there are no unproblematic patterns for "making sense" of *what is there* any more. Chinese intellectuals, the actors, are having this experience while trying to weave their own identity, scholars are having it while trying to understand what the actors are doing. We only have to shift our perspective a little, however, and this difference disappears, although others may remain. The project and the task of weaving an identity is not limited to the so-called *East*. Foregrounding the category of *Nativity*, we have to say that weaving and reweaving an identity just is what living in a culture is all about. So-called Western intellectuals and scholars are no less engaged in this task than Chinese intellectuals. They too are redefining and reformulating their identity by weaving together *what is there* and trying to transform it in a creative way. The new entities of the so-called *East* are part of *what is there*, and a strategy of exclusion is as bad a strategy of building an identity in the case of *Western* intellectuals as it is in the case of Chinese intellectuals. Trying to "make sense" of what Chinese intellectuals are doing in their attempt at weaving an identity is part of the task of weaving an identity in the case of intellectuals working in the so-called *West*. From this perspective, the authors of the book we are discussing here indeed are actors as much as those actors they are trying to understand.

The essays collected in this volume provide ample material for developing further this process of repositioning authors on Chinese affairs probably have to go through in order to be able to work efficiently. It may be that this process, and

working through it while passing through it, will finally produce a scholarly language in this field that is more adequate to its subject than the one we presently have.

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