CHINA TRANSFORMED

Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience

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INTRODUCTION
Beyond European Models
of Historical Change

When scholars look for the origins of the contemporary world, many begin with the political expansion of Western states across the globe and the economic transformations brought on by a capitalist system of European origins. Indeed, it has become difficult to imagine the construction of Europe and the expansion of Western power across the world without the seemingly natural and necessary unfolding of national state formation and capitalist development. History often seems to reach non-Western peoples as they come into contact with Europeans. Their modern histories are conventionally constructed along the axis of native responses to Western challenges.

Alternatively, the cultural and historical integrity of non-Western societies may be considered apart from European influences, or as hybrid societies built from a combination of native and Western influences. This distancing of non-Western parts of the world from Western power asserts multidimensional identities for Africa, Asia, and Latin America, distinct from the one-dimensional native–Western axis. The urge to establish distance and separatedness from Western power has led people to create multiple markers of their differences.

Comparing Patterns of Historical Change
Growing recognition of the analytical and interpretive limitations of seeing non-Western history in terms of European national state formation and the development of capitalism has led numerous scholars to focus on such issues as cultural identity, gender formation, race, and nation. This book too aims to dislodge European state making and capitalism from their privileged positions as universalizing themes in world history, but it offers a new approach: compari-
son with the dynamics of economic and political change in a major non-Western civilization. It seeks to establish how this civilization differed from Europe, but only as part of a larger program of identifying similarities and connections as well.

One conventional way in which comparisons have been made has been to assert some key difference. In the 1950s one common family of explanations for the failure of East Asian countries to develop modern industrial economies cited cultural factors, stressing the absence of an aggressive and acquisitive individualism in Confucian societies. Basing their arguments at least loosely on Weberian arguments, some scholars of the post–World War II world claimed that a country such as Japan lacked the entrepreneurial spirit of daring and innovation necessary for a modern industrialized economy.1 More recently a very different story has been told in which Confucian virtues, such as respect for authority and the submerging of individual desires to group goals in a spirit of self-sacrifice, are promoted to explain the Japanese economic miracle.2 The juxtaposition of these polar assessments of “culture” suggests a contradiction: how can cultural attitudes simultaneously hinder and promote economic change? The same methodological problem arises in respect to the significance of the ecological and organizational features of rice agriculture, in contrast, at least implicitly, to those of European dry field farming. In 1957 Karl Wittfogel made the irrigation demands of rice agriculture a cornerstone of his theory about hydraulic societies composed of peasants who labored under despotic governments. More recently, however, some scholars have suggested that rice agriculture encourages small-scale family farming because intensive labor demands require supervision costs too high to make large-scale management reasonable. Petty commodity production results from rice agriculture, promoting the social freedom of peasants (Palat 1995). How can rice agriculture be the foundation for both despotism and an independent market-oriented peasantry?

Differences alone cannot create comparability. Without standards for comparison, effective generalization is limited. We are condemned to an extreme relativism without any strategy to replace various forms of Eurocentrism with interpretations that can embrace Western and non-Western experiences on an analytically more equal basis. Unless comparisons and contrasts are made first, assessments of connections between Western and various non-Western countries too readily reflect only the Western view. Creating strategies of comparison that avoid privileging European categories of analysis and dynamics of historical change is one important task for the chapters that follow.

1 Of course even in the 1950s, as the Japanese economy recovered from the catastrophe of World War II, the long-term base of economic development was firmly placed. But this did not resolve the challenge of embracing Japanese cultural traits in a concept of “modernization.” See, for example, John W. Hall 1965.

2 A range of interpretations locate Japan’s economic success in the country’s particular history and culture. They include works as diverse as Morishima 1982 and Dore 1987.
dynamics, so that we may grasp what the differences may mean. To pursue these tasks, I propose strategies for avoiding an exclusive reliance on European categories without forsaking them entirely.

One Thousand Years of Chinese History and Western Social Theory

During the last century, expectations about historical change over the past millennium of Chinese history have been based on European history. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Japanese historians have pictured China between the tenth and twelfth centuries as a society with a growing urban culture supported by an expanding commercial economy. The major question then becomes: What derailed China from this promising beginning and kept China from sustaining its developmental lead over Europe? An alternative view stresses the absence of secular change before the nineteenth century. Political ideology, social institutions, and cultural practices are seen to reproduce a constant and permanent order. Change is conceived as cyclical, the most famous formulation being the traditional dynastic cycle, in which a ruling house is vigorous in its youth and rules benevolently, only to become lazy and corrupt in later generations.

These two basic views of China—social change gone wrong and stagnation—are themselves developed out of the Western tradition of social theory as explanatory of modern society. Karl Marx and Max Weber each argued for a distinctive cluster of traits that set Europe off from other parts of the world; these traits account for Western successes and the failures of others. In Marx’s account of capitalism and modern society, focused primarily on Europe, Asia was a region of stagnation, and European imperialism there was a brutal but positive force for social and economic change. Weber’s study of world religions led him to emphasize European religious and economic change; describing historical development according to a dynamic of economic development and bureaucratic rationality, Weber, like Marx, presented a path of social development defined by Europe’s distinctive successes.

Marx and Weber offer particular paths toward modernity. Later scholars universalized these alternative statements of Europe’s trajectory of change. For instance, many Chinese and Japanese historians of China have seen the country moving through Marxist stages of development. Chinese historians in particular have identified an “incipient capitalism” in which changes in production and trade argue for China’s trajectory along a common economic path to modernity. But expectations for historical change held by Western historians of China as well have their empirical basis in accounts of European historical development. Nearly all scholarship on Chinese social and economic history, whatever its origins, is based on assumptions about social change imported from European experiences.

After World War II, American sociologists promoted European history as the basis for social theory. Talcott Parsons (1966), for example, explicitly derived his general theory from an interpretation of European historical change. Looking back from the mid-twentieth century to reconstruct how Western society, and American society in particular, had reached its present state, Parsons created a structural-functional model of social change in which the differentiation of politics, economics, and religion became the norm for modernity. To generalize his theory beyond the historical path derived from Western experiences, Parsons shifted to an evolutionary model of social change that portrayed the traits of successful societies as functions necessary to become modern. But since these functions were derived from Western experiences, the norms of social development remained resolutely rooted in a particular reading of the European past. Parsons viewed sociocultural developments as a process of social differentiation in which religion separates from secular culture and the economy becomes independent of government interference. The Industrial Revolution and the development of democratic institutions in the wake of the French Revolution powered the process of social change. Parsons’s scheme embraced variations within Europe, but what of areas outside the European framework? Are they stagnant, or do they simply parallel Europe for a while before diverging? Neither alternative is particularly helpful.

The radical alternative to reliance on Western categories is to ignore them entirely. Scholars who have labored to reconstruct Chinese historical phenomena without explicit reference to European history or Western social theory have made clear contributions in intellectual history. But reliance on native categories limits us to imagining possibilities within that specific linguistic frame of reference. Problems immediately follow. If, for instance, notions of historical time or secular change do not exist linguistically, do they not exist historically either? Does the failure of participants to observe change mean that outside observers too cannot see change? When we turn to social, political, or economic history, the very categories that participants and later analysts use to examine phenomena raise issues of comparability. Simply to examine kinship, for instance, suggests that kinship ties in China can be compared with those in other societies. To say that the Chinese had a “state” or “government” depends on some general category for which the Chinese and other cases share common characteristics. Similarly, discussions of “markets” presume that commercial exchange has certain qualities found even in widely separated contexts. How scholars today could invent explanations innocent of any assumptions about how things work elsewhere is difficult to imagine. The degree to which our analyses presume common or distinctive terms shapes how “general” or “particular” we consider our research problems to be, but even the most particular are ultimately framed at least implicitly by knowledge beyond the specific case.

Western social theory first developed through disagreements over how to characterize the particular path of change that led to modern society. The contemporary Chinese historian whose world view and perspective on the past is already shaped by influences beyond China faces a particular problem when he or she considers topics involving important connections between China and Europe. Many important traditions of scholarship on the modern world treat such connections
as primary. Marx’s insight into the disruptive impact of imperialism, for example, becomes the starting point for the Marxist tradition’s efforts to build upon the connections forged between Europe and the world to construct a system within which non-Western changes are dictated by European powers. Alternatively, Western impact can be more positively viewed as introducing new opportunities economically as well as politically and socially as society is remade in a modern, that is Western, manner. This intellectual strategy easily associates “traditional” with barriers obstructing the positive dynamics of change.

To invest the native with independent meaning of its own and not just meaning derived from its reaction to the West, American scholars began to turn in the 1980s to the eighteenth century where they analyzed domestic dynamics of historical change preceding Western impact. There they found Japanese scholars looking forward from the sixteenth century. Nonetheless, the search for native dynamics often finds parallels to European dynamics; alternatives to European dynamics are proposed less frequently. In either case Europe looms large as a point of reference for studies of modern China.

How can the agenda for understanding Chinese history not be reduced to either its links to Europe or its parallel evolution? Here is my strategy. First, I compare the two master processes of modern European history—the development of capitalism and the formation of national states—to Chinese economic and political changes. I identify important features of the European processes through comparisons with Chinese dynamics, then consider small-scale and large-scale collective actions that seem surprisingly similar and yet include crucial differences. Regarding economic change, I argue for a cluster of similar dynamics of economic change in early modern Europe and late imperial China followed by a crucial rupture in nineteenth-century Europe. As for state making, I contrast the historical circumstances of Chinese and European political changes before and after Western (and Japanese) military power threatened China with dismemberment between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Finally, I explore the rationales, contexts, and significance of small-scale political and economic protests (grain seizures and tax resistance) and large-scale actions (revolutions). The outcomes of this enterprise supply fresh perspectives on major dynamics of change in both Chinese and European history. These comparisons can then be used to extend and revise social theory.

Nineteenth-century social theory has been discredited in many quarters. One way to move beyond the great social theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is to incorporate the patterns of historical change found in non-Western societies, a challenge that affects scholars in several disciplines. This book offers one response to this crucial task, a response that seeks both to reduce the aspirations of generalizing in social theory and to expand the range of material that such theory can adequately encompass. I start in Europe, from which so much research on non-Western parts of the world has struggled to escape. To transcend Eurocentric views of the world, I believe we should return to European cases to consider carefully how national state formation and capitalist development actually took place as historical processes rather than as abstract theoretical models. After assessing Chinese dynamics according to European measures of changes I evaluate European possibilities according to Chinese standards in order to introduce comparisons not usually made by contemporary analysts. This strategy allows us to qualify and revise older insights rather than discard them for being deeply flawed. Eurocentric views of the world are inadequate, but they are not necessarily more wrong (or right) than comparisons made from other vantage points. Sustained comparison of Chinese and European patterns of economic development, state formation, and social protest can suggest ways of interpreting historical change in both parts of the world, identify those subjects on which additional historical research may be especially useful, and contribute to the construction of social theory grounded not only in the European historical past but that of other regions as well.

A Disclaimer and a Defense

A book of this scale unavoidably contains descriptions and assessments that some readers will consider incomplete or misleading. Readers with a strong background in either Chinese or European history may find me belaboring the-obvious in some situations and being too cryptic in others. Those who wish for a more explicit engagement with traditions of social theory will find the book short on context for some of my arguments. I intend my discussions of Chinese and European history to highlight features that become especially significant when viewed comparatively. My strategies of comparison recognize, whenever possible, the virtues of beginning with similarities in order to establish a clear basis for assessing the nature and importance of differences. Yet much of what has intrigued generations of historians looking across civilizations are the differences that separate various parts of the world. Social theories generally have difficulties explaining large clusters of differences. I intend my analysis to provide one set of strategies to deal with this basic problem in social theory. Solutions alert us to topics in both Chinese and European history that deserve careful scrutiny. When history is written to help develop our more general ideas about social change, we can aspire to improve our explanations of different worlds in the past.

Footnotes:
3 For an introduction to the Japanese literature in English, see Grove and Daniels 1984.
4 For examples of scholars who take European references for Chinese change, see Huang 1990 and Rowe 1993. Rowe consciously looks for Chinese parallels with Europe; Huang claims to be escaping European references in an essay predicated upon European norms. R. B. Wong 1990, 1992, and 1993 discuss their efforts.
5 Foucault’s insight that the production of knowledge is intimately enmeshed with the production of power relationships has provided fertile ground for research in the social sciences and humanities, but it is not adequate to adjudicate among competing interpretations. If we can do no more than recognize differences and attribute them to social and political factors, we significantly limit our ability to generate systematic social science knowledge.
This is primarily a book about Chinese history and secondarily a book about European history. The comparisons I draw allow me to suggest some ideas on how to build better general social theory. When the aim is to reach a variety of readers, no mix of argument and evidence will serve all readers equally.

There are also analytical difficulties in a work embracing long stretches of both Chinese and European history. First, the spatial units of China and Europe are often much larger than the areas being compared in particular ways. Economic and political patterns vary considerably in both China and Europe. Those patterns I present as typical or important for China and Europe do not include all particular situations at either end of Eurasia. Wherever it is useful and feasible to do so, I have tried to remind the reader of the particular spatial units being analyzed. Second, some issues that some specialists deem important receive modest attention, if any. I urge the reader to judge the usefulness of my arguments and evidence on the basis of what they directly help to explain as well as what they suggest about related types of analysis. Noting items not addressed or inadequately treated matters, I think, only when such absences undermine the arguments or qualify the evidence presented.

PART I

ECONOMIC HISTORY
AND THE PROBLEM
OF DEVELOPMENT

Economics as a discipline emerged alongside the development of capitalism. It became the set of analytical tools used to explain the operations of markets, firms, and individual economic actors. Originally tied intimately to the study of politics—the classical economists such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo engaged in political economy—economics narrowed its focus to a set of issues that have come increasingly to be addressed in the language of formal mathematics. For some economists, the discipline has reached a point of crisis. Its divorce from explanations of real-world behavior is no longer acceptable, but the conventional model remains the testing of theoretical propositions with appropriate data. When data sets do not fit the parameters of a theory, one looks for a set of data that provide a better fit. In this the economist resembles the experimental scientist: both accept a distance from naturally occurring reality as the cost of achieving some control over selected phenomena.

The discipline of economics has invested most of its efforts and reaped its largest rewards in the study of contemporary capitalist economies. When we turn to economic history, economics does best in institutional settings in which its assumptions clearly apply. The further we move from the contemporary West in time and space, the more fragile is the fit between economic assumptions and social conditions. In analyzing economic history in this book, I argue that certain principles, such as trade flows according to supply and demand, price movements according to changes in supply and demand, and spatial specialization of labor (e.g., a cotton producer buying his grain), fit what we know of late imperial China's economy quite comfortably. I further argue that a Chinese peasant's economic undertakings were similar in fundamental and important ways to those of his Eu-