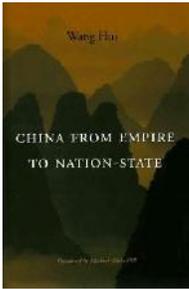


## REVIEW: *CHINA FROM EMPIRE TO NATION-STATE*

Reviewed by Tristan G Brown (Columbia University)



Wang Hui (Michael Gibbs Hill, translator). 2014. *China from Empire to Nation-State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. ISBN 9780674046955 (hardcover 29.95USD), ASIN B00O1SZEM6 (Kindle 21.49USD). xiv+179 pp. Translator's Introduction, Index.

Michael Gibbs Hill's excellent translation of the introduction to Wang Hui's four-volume opus, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* 现代中国思想的兴起 provides a substantial contribution to scholars of China and intellectual historians by bringing another of Wang Hui's critical works into English (for other such examples, see Wang and Hutters 2003 and 2011). The task of translating could not have been easy, as Wang Hui frequently cites works from Chinese antiquity and translated texts from abroad, making Hill's results truly exceptional. The translation is accessible and painstakingly executed, with many important phrases explained for non-specialists alongside transliterated key terms. *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* demonstrates the need for translation work in the fields of area studies by making the important works of non-English speakers available to Anglophone audiences. As Zhang Yongle pointed out in his review on the work *in toto*, "It can safely be said that nothing comparable to Wang Hui's work has appeared in China since the late Qing-early Republican period" (Zhang 2010:71). Wang Hui, while exploring the links between China and its past through the country's rich intellectual traditions, manages to deftly discuss China in global terms and historical contexts. Hill's helpful introduction contextualizes Wang's writing style in the zeitgeist of the post-Tiananmen period from 1990 to 2010.

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Chapter One, 'Two Narratives of China and Their Derivative Forms' identifies the tensions between two conceptions of Chinese modernity. One school that came to prominence in mid-century Japan, the Kyoto School, represented by Naitō Konan and Miyazaki Ichisada, argued that early modernity began in East Asia during the Northern Song (960-1127). This, in turn, explained later political developments in Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan. Paralleling the identification by scholars such as Harold Berman of the "modern" legal institutions and bureaucratic states in Europe in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Kyoto School read the Northern Song as a well-structured early modern state, with an early modern religion (secular Confucianism), an early modern educational system, and capitalized markets (Berman 1983). Another trend of thought that Wang Hui sees in the works of Chinese Marxists, John Fairbank (the stimulus-response model), and Max Weber, asserts that China's modernization as beginning with the Sino-Western encounter, wherein China's legal, economic, political, and ethical systems were viewed as obstacles to the development of capitalism. Wang continues by parsing the tensions inherent in terms such as "Chinese colonialism," "Han colonialism," and "Qing imperialism" by tracing different genealogies of imperialism, and the tensions present in the two aforementioned approaches.

Chapter Two 'The Empire/Nation-State Binary and European World History', looks at the complex, trans-lingual origins of nineteenth and twentieth century Chinese terminologies for empire and nation-state (Liu 1995). Here, Wang Hui illustrates how empire as an analytical category for describing China came to prominence only in opposition to the nation-state, wherein national self-determination was positioned against the military despotism of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual empires. Echoing Said, Wang Hui points out that the category of empire as applied to China in the nineteenth century was typically used in Asian contexts to emphasize the country's "backward" nature and failed to consider the role of acculturation in frontier territories in expanding the boundaries of China over the centuries (Said 1978).

Chapter Three 'Heavenly Principle/Universal Principle and History' outlines the history of *li* 理 'principle' from the "Heavenly Principle" of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism to the "Universal Principle" that replaced it at the turn of the twentieth century. Affirming Peter Bol's identification of intellectual transformations from the Tang to Song, which saw the concept of *shi* 士 change from men of good birth to men of high culture, Wang Hui pushes back against both Kyoto School intellectuals who read progressive ideologies into Neo-Confucianism and May Fourth intellectuals who rejected Confucianism as irredeemably backwards (Bol 1994). The "Heavenly Principle" instead, reads models for the present into Chinese antiquity by setting standards for both emperor and subject for good governance and moral conduct through self-cultivation. Finally, through examining the works of Yan Fu (1854-1921), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), and Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), Wang Hui delineates the "Universal Principle." This new principle, which was intimately joined with scientific discourses, emphasized future political apotheosis over an idealized antiquity while bifurcating facts from values in reordering epistemological frameworks and systems of morality.

While it would be obvious to emphasize the discontinuity in this restructuring of Chinese genealogies of knowledge, Wang Hui identifies subtle, contingent relationships between the two. Whereas "Heavenly Principle" took its ideal as the past, "Universal Principle" emphasized a linear, progressive future in which *ziran* 'Nature', now an objective reality, became artificially segregated from culture (Wang 2014:100). Precisely because both approaches retained the notion of *li* 'principle', the possibility that connections and debates from China's history could and can be invoked in the present, persists.

The final chapter, 'China's Modern Identity and the Transformation of Empire', examines the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Qing Empire and changing notions of sovereignty against Benedict Anderson's theory of the socially constructed "imagined communities" of nations in the twentieth century. Wang

Hui argues that the rise of literacy and the creation of shared national culture through print capitalism that Anderson identifies as essential for the creation of conscious political communities, does not particularly fit China. Instead, Wang Hui points out, somewhat akin to dynamics recently explored by Matthew Mosca and Li Chen, that new channels of geographic knowledge and dynamics of unequal treaty-based sovereignty under semi- (or hypo-) colonialism served, among other factors, to create a definition of [Greater] 'China' as a legally-recognized, autonomous state with vast geographic possibilities (Mosca 2013; Li 2016; Goodman 2004; Rogaski 2004).

Turning to the state-building movements in the twentieth century, Wang Hui builds on Philip Kuhn's (2002) well-known work on the extractive challenges of an industrializing economy that informed reform agendas in the decades prior to Collectivization under the Communists by concluding that "they moved in the direction of eliminating foundational social organizations and institutional diversity" (Wang 2014:136). Calling the Chinese revolution and "the ideology that came from it" "the most important phenomenon in twentieth century world history" certainly stresses the necessity of theorizing Modern China on its own terms in ways that relate to global contexts, as Wang Hui has so ably done (Wang 2014:142).

Michael Gibbs Hill provides an important contribution to the field by making Wang Hui accessible to classroom audiences and non-China specialists. Wang Hui's ability to connect and convey diverse strains of Chinese thought that speak to the problems associated with "modernity" builds on efforts by Rebecca Karl (2002) to de-center the origins of Chinese nationalism from a purely Japan-Western axis.

One issue that Wang Hui addresses under this rubric is the question of national consciousness and early twentieth century print culture. Wang Hui pushes back against the idea that "Chinese" as an encompassing category can be explained through Anderson's work on the creation of "imagined" national communities. Anderson's framework may well work better for some *minzu* 'ethnic groups'

living within China, as Thomas Mullaney (2010) has insightfully shown. By arguing that the development of print capitalism in China should be read as one of several conditions for the "modern renewal of Chinese identity" (Wang 2014:104) in a post imperial context, Wang Hui provides a thought-provoking, re-reading of Anderson's work as it pertains to China.

Wang Hui is well aware of scholarship on "New Qing History" (Millward 1998; Rawski 1998; Crossley 1999; Elliott 2001) and engages with some of the complex forces that brought contemporary China into existence. His impressive enterprise of focusing on a centuries-long, Chinese intellectual tradition that could be loosely characterized as "Confucian" bears witness to the remarkable distinction in Chinese history between how empire-building occurred on the ground and how such activities were discussed by literati elites. For the late imperial period, this is particularly true for periods prior to the Jiaqing Reign (1796-1820), when non-bannermen began exerting a more pronounced intellectual influence in the governance of regions that were not historically Chinese (Mosca 2011). Confucianism was publically attacked for much of twentieth century Chinese history, thus it is particularly interesting to see how the author searches for the foundations of a "Chinese modernity" in these texts. While this Confucian tradition gives Wang Hui much material to draw from, one of the challenges that New Qing History has brought to the table is questioning whether the forces that enabled China's successful ability to retain its imperial territories into the present can be understood through Chinese language sources alone. Further exploring the roles of Manchu, Mongol, Uyghur, and Tibetan language sources, as well as the positions of Buddhism and Daoism in the development of Modern China, are certainly exciting avenues of future inquiry.

One example of such a complication that might be integrated into future work is the "priest-patron" relationship (Tib. *mchod-yon*) that, like many of the conceptual frameworks introduced in Wang Hui's study, does not translate easily into Western notions of sovereignty. First introduced by the Tanguts (Ch. Xixia) and adopted

by the Mongols under the Yuan, the "priest-patron" relationship connected Tibet's religious hierarchs with secular leaders. As Elliot Sperling (1994) and Johan Elverskog (2006) have discussed, there are historical limitations in applying such models to explain the integration of certain groups into imperial territories, however, from the Yuan to the twentieth century, the Tibetan Buddhist world monastically stretched from Beijing to Mongolia, the Tibetan Plateau, and northwestern Yunnan.

The history of Tibetan-Chinese relations is well documented and is of great importance to Beijing-Inner Asian relations. The Fifth Karmapa (1384-1415) visited Nanjing during the early Ming (Berger 2001). For centuries, the Yuan-era Tibetan-Mongol "White Stupa Temple" was the tallest building in Beijing, a city founded by the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Wang Hui deftly addresses the need to explore such factors in discussing the evolution of Modern China. He writes:

In discussing the meaning of the concept of "China," we must ask the following questions: Once the Xianbei, Tuoba, Muslims, Jewish people, and other groups took power or migrated to China proper, how were they gradually fused into a larger social community? And when forced to live among others, how did they maintain their own identity? Once these groups had defeated and conquered the dynasties of China proper, why did northern peoples – including Mongolians and Manchus – transform themselves into Chinese dynasties, establishing a multipolar framework of power within a set period of time and scope? (Wang 2014:115)<sup>1</sup>

By directing his critical inquiry of understanding "China" in historical terms towards its minority peoples, Wang Hui opens the door for dialogue with scholars outside of China who in recent years have turned towards similar questions. In an earlier chapter, Wang Hui

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<sup>1</sup> On how some of these groups maintained and fostered their own identity, see Benite (2005).

asks a related question of great profundity that speaks directly to his delineating the Chinese genealogies of empire and empire-building:

...the Qing dynasty authorized and encouraged Han people to immigrate to southeastern regions such as Yunnan and Guizhou, which resulted in large-scale conflicts with the Miao and Hui peoples and a series of major disasters. (For example, conflicts in Yunnan that took place in the 1870s resulted in a 90 percent decline in the local Hui population.) Was this result the product of "Chinese colonialism," "Han colonialism," or the product of the Qing imperial system and the processes of its transformation? (Wang 2014:19)

These are critical questions, not just for their own substance and value, but for the dating of when they became questions for people thinking about Chinese history. The Ming Dynasty produced a series of Sino-Persian dictionaries and literary anthologies such as the *Huihuiguan yiyu* 回回馆译语 '*The Translations of the Muslims' Office*' and the *Huihuiguan zazi* 回回馆杂字 '*The Miscellaneous Words of the Muslims' Office*', which were aimed at facilitating diplomatic contacts with a number of countries. These countries are identified as the *Tianfangguo* 天方国, including Hami, Turpan, Badakhshan, Balkh (in contemporary Afghanistan), Damascus, Egypt, Khorasan, and Samarqand (Wu and Zhang 2010:87-95; 235-237). The linguistic guide is well-worth study in its own right, but the Persian language words for two Chinese provinces are specifically of interest to Wang Hui's questions.

Alongside a list of exonyms surrounding the Great Ming, such as Pr. *tan'ghūt*: 'Tanguts', Ch. Hexi 河西 'The Hexi Corridor', and Pr. *jūrjī*, Ch. *nūzhi* 女直 'Jurchens', are listed two Chinese provinces in their Persian-language names: Pr. *qaryānī*; Ch. Yunnan 云南 'Yunnan Province' and Pr. *kinjānfū* (Ch. Shaanxi 陕西 'Shaanxi Province', 'Qinzhou 秦州'). No other Chinese provinces are listed. This dictionary, together with its appended Persian-language letters, may be some of the strongest known evidence that Persian-language

speakers held positions of power in these provinces through the early to mid-Ming.

Wang Hui is particularly persuasive when positioning his questions of minority communities in China as intimately related to the evolution of Modern China. We might note that a number of Mongol legacies (regulations on marital laws, Beijing as the imperial capital, the "priest-patron" relationship, the growth of Sino-Muslim communities in frontier pivot-points such as Yunnan, among many others) influenced Chinese states long after the collapse of the Yuan, even if some such legacies were not at the center of literati, public, or academic discourses until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One work for future studies that also underscores some of the gaps between late imperial statecraft and Confucian discourses is *Yesou puyan* 野叟曝言 'Humble Words of a Rustic Elder' c. 1780), written by Xia Jingqu (1705-1787), a Jiangsu native. Though composed around the time of Cao Xueqin's *红楼梦 Hong Lou Meng* (*A Dream of Red Mansions*), *Yesou puyan* did not become well-known until the 1880's (Epstein 2001). Set in the Ming Dynasty, the novel follows the career of Wen Suchen, who discovers upon his trips to the capital that foreign Buddhist monks have brought heterodox teachings to Beijing, where the emperor has fallen under their spell. In promoting an orthodox Confucian vision, the novel can be read as a thinly veiled critique of the presence of Tibetan and Mongolian influences in the Manchu court. Political unrest and official corruption are ascribed to these teachings, which the novel characterizes as permeating the wider world beyond China. Speaking to Gray Tuttle's (2005) work on Tibetan Buddhism as a common language for Asian nation-building in the twentieth century, the novel may point to the idea that some governing forces in China's past often existed outside of, or at least were in tension with, the intellectual purview of the Confucian tradition at the heart of this important study.

The wide-ranging questions that Wang Hui poses in this well-translated introduction to his major 2004 opus have no easy answers, but they are pertinent to many contemporary debates. "Forms of

sovereignty, models of identity, and global relations created by modern revolutions are currently facing a deep and wide-ranging crisis" in the wake of the "penetration of the global economy into every corner of the world" (Wang 2014:143). Given this fact, Wang Hui makes a persuasive case for examining imperial processes and conceptual frameworks of statecraft in Chinese history. In doing so, he joins the ranks of Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Gayatri Spivak (1999) for seminally contributing to the field of Post-Colonial Studies, while also speaking to the scholarly legacy of Ali Shariati<sup>2</sup> (1980) by providing a genealogical re-reading of the Chinese Revolution through the dynamism of the country's own intellectual traditions (Rahnema 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> 1933-1977.

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