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Foreign Concessions and Western Impact in the Late Qing Period: Historiographical Approaches and Political Interpretations

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Abstract During the last few decades, the historians of the PRC have adopted different interpretative frameworks in analysing the Chinese encounter/clash with the West: from the revolutionary paradigm to the modernisation theory, from the 'impact-response' model to the 'China-centred approach'. This essay discusses how Chinese scholars have applied such frameworks in assessing the role of foreign concessions established in the treaty ports during the late Qing period: considered as a sign of the imperialist presence by the early generation of Marxist historians, international settlements have been later re-evaluated in a more positive light, in the context of a lively historiographical debate regarding their unique role in the modernisation of the country. However, the liveliness of the Chinese academic discussion has recently been suppressed due to the campaign against 'historical nihilism' launched by President Xi Jinping, which silenced any representation of modern Chinese history that does not adhere to the Party line.

Keywords *Zujie* 租界 (foreign concessions). *Lishi xuwuzhuyi* 历史虚无主义 (historical nihilism). Western impact. Late Qing period. Chinese historiography.

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1 The Paradigm of the Modernisation Theory

In the last decades of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), China experienced a manifold moment of crisis, going through a profound evolution of its political, institutional, and social systems. In interpreting



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such changes, both Western and Chinese scholars have adopted alternative theoretical paradigms, judging in different ways the role played by the Chinese encounter/clash with the West.

Before examining these interpretations, it is worth taking a careful look at how Chinese Marxist historiography has conceived foreign presence in nineteenth-century China: for the most part, it has been denounced as an imperialist aggression perpetrated by Western powers to encroach upon China's sovereignty. The reaction of the Chinese against this imperialist act has been highlighted by many authors, such as Fan Wenlan, who considered the people's resistance to foreign invaders as the "main thread" in modern Chinese history. Focussing on the aggressive nature of Western expansionism, he stressed how the grief and misery of the Chinese people caused by imperialist powers led to rebellions and revolutions (Fan 1949). This approach has emphasised the role of uprisings and insurgencies, giving rise to an interpretative paradigm shared by the early generation of PRC historians, such as Guo Moruo, Jian Bozan, and Li Dingsheng: in their view, the struggle against imperialism was the 'main theme' (*zhuti* 主题) of modern Chinese history, whose ontological basis was provided by the revolutionary trope.

Moving beyond the celebratory nature of Marxist scholarship, it is interesting to consider other historiographical approaches, widely endorsed at the end of the 1990s: largely influenced by Western theories of modernisation - which have had a wide impact on Chinese academic circles since the mid/late 1980s -, these new perspectives abandoned the revolutionary archetype, calling for a historical re-examination of the late Qing period.

The forerunner and main proponent of this new trend was Luo Rongqu, professor of American History at Beijing University; in the early 1980s, he gave a series of lectures at Princeton University, where he met and began an intense intellectual exchange with Cyril E. Black, author of the famous book *The Dynamics of Modernization* (1966). Fearful of being accused of introducing "Western bourgeois theories" in China, Luo did not officially begin his research on Chinese modernisation until 1986, when the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was finally over (Wang 1986). By the end of his life, Luo was considered the pioneering scholar of the modernisation paradigm, having written many volumes on this subject (Luo 1992; 1993).

Moreover, as early as 1985, Black's book had already been presented in the journal *Dushu* by Ding Xueliang, a professor at Fudan University, known for having introduced to China the theories of Durkheim, Weber, Talcott Parsons, and Huntington (Ding 1985a; 1985b). The issue of development and underdevelopment in non-Western societies was also addressed by other scholars, such as Sun Liping, Yan Lixian, and Li Huaiyin, who critically engaged with the foreign theories of modernity.

But it was only in the 1990s that the modernisation approach to the study of the late Qing period was widely accepted and recognised by the Chinese academy; in 1996, its definitive consecration would be marked by the endorsement of the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Hu Sheng. In the preface to the second edition of the book *From the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement*, Hu argued how desirable it was and how decisive it would have been to use “modernisation” as the main narrative thread of modern history (Hu 1996): in this perspective, the focus of historical writings should have not been the nature of productive and class relations, but the transition from traditional to modern institutions, and the role of values and cultural patterns of modernity.

The historian Feng Lin further contributed to this re-interpretation, significantly in his two volumes *Rethinking a Century of the History of China*, whose synopsis reads: “The one-hundred years of modern Chinese history were not merely a history of revolution; they were, in fact, a history of modernization” (Feng 1998).

Notably, however, the wide application of this interpretative framework does not imply an uncritical acceptance of Western thoughts: indeed, the Chinese intellectuals highlighted how the context in which Western theories of modernisation emerged - namely the 1950s and 1960s, during the Cold War - carries a whole series of political and cultural implications. According to Luo Rongqu, the idea of modernity was itself a Eurocentric concept, since it assumes that only Western societies could embody the ideal prototype of modernisation. Therefore, being the product of a positive view of social evolution, the modernisation theory can be considered the ideology of the US imperialism and its hegemony in the postwar years (Luo 1992; 1993). Such criticisms have also been voiced by other scholars, such as Wang Xudong and Li Junxiang, who refused to equate modernisation with Westernisation, arguing that modernity is not the result of a linear diffusion process, that moves from the West to the East (Wang, Li 2003).

2 Reassessing the Role of Foreign Concessions

According to the modernisation paradigm, the root causes of China's backwardness are not to be sought outside the country, but inside it: hence, they should not be misidentified with the imperialist presence on Chinese territory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such an interpretation is ground-breaking, since, in terms of historiographical research, it opens up the possibility of viewing foreign influence as playing a positive and active role in the transformation of Qing society.

Seen from this perspective, one of the most controversial issues is related to the interpretation of the main symbol of Western oppression: foreign concessions (*zujie* 租界), established since the second half of the nineteenth century. Concessions were areas within the treaty ports, perpetually leased by the Chinese government to a foreign nation at the cost of a modest rent; foreign consuls, for their part, had the right to lease portions of this land to their fellow countryman. Indeed, since the Chinese government retained its sovereignty over the leased territory, foreigners could not directly purchase the land, but only rent it 'in perpetuity'. The concessions were also protected by extraterritoriality from the reach of the Chinese law: on the basis of this principle, foreign nations exercised their authority over their fellow citizens according to the laws of their own country.

Concessions were located both along the Chinese East Coast and inland, especially along the main waterways: Shanghai, Tianjin, Hankou, and Xiamen were among the major cities in which they were established. The Shanghai concession was the biggest one: it was created in 1863, when the British and the Americans merged their areas, giving birth to the Shanghai International Settlement (*Shanghai Gonggong Zujie* 上海公共租界). Starting from 1849, even the French set up their concession in the city.

Drawing on the modernisation paradigm, many authors, starting from the late 1990s and the early 2000s, have reassessed the role of concessions, reconsidering them no longer as 'enclaves of imperialism', but as catalyst centres of modern innovations and as key attractions for foreign commerce, investment, banking, and manufacturing. Among these authors were Zhou Jiming from People's University, Wu Shiyong from Shandong University, Xiong Yuezhi from Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Wang Limin from the East China University of Political Science and Law in Shanghai, Zhang Haoran from Henan Normal University, Tu Wenxue from Jiangnan University in Wuhan, Chen Mingyuan from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, Yang Bingde and Chi Congwen, both from Zhejiang University.

It is worth noting that, despite their innovative approach, in the opening section of their essays, many scholars seem to adhere to the old-fashioned assumption that concessions are the product of Western

invasion: indeed, they present foreign settlements as an institutional foundation of modern capitalism, a microcosm of imperialist domination. From this standpoint, concessions are still portrayed as “the land of sin, the source of aggression, and the hell on earth” (Zhang, Niu 2004, 255), and foreign powers are depicted as carrying out reckless political, economic and cultural aggression against China, causing tremendous suffering to its people (Zhang 2008).

It seems that the purpose of these statements is to show formal respect to the ideological assumptions of the previous historiography, maintaining a dialectical approach to the subject. Indeed, these negative judgments, once given, are gradually abandoned, shifting towards a more positive appraisal of foreign concessions: instead of their nefarious impact on Chinese society, their constructive role is cautiously recognised, re-evaluating them as models of modern urban civilisation and management systems from the West (Chen 2013).

Among others, Chen Mingyuan justifies this revaluation in Marxist terms, identifying the ideological underpinning of his analysis in Marx’s concept of ‘constructive mission’ (*jianshexing shiming* 建设性使命; Chen 2013). As is well known, in *The Future Results of British Rule in India* the German philosopher had predicted that Britain and other Western power invaders would accomplish a dual mission: one was destructive, in the sense of eliminating the old Asian-style society; the other was a constructive mission, to lay the material foundation for Western-style society in Asia (Marx 1853). Drawing on Marx, Chen argues that in Shanghai, Tianjin, Wuhan, and other treaty ports, this “constructive mission” partially got rid of the corrupt imperial autocratic dictatorship and feudal bureaucracy, and initially achieved a civilised municipal version of capitalism. Therefore, he re-evaluates concessions as “constructive forces” in terms of laying the foundation for the material civilisation of modern society. From this perspective, foreign concessions are thus viewed as the initial engine of China’s modernisation process, as an opportunity to hybridise Chinese and Western cultures; they placed the modern European urban model alongside the traditional prototype of a Chinese city, challenging it in a constructive way.

Most of these studies focussed on Shanghai, defining the International Settlement as “a country within a country” (*guo zhong zhi guo* 国中之国): even though its territory formally belonged to China, it is considered a self-contained “small country” (Zhou 1997). Being China’s most modern and Westernised city, Shanghai was indeed the place where the earliest steps towards modernisation were made. In this respect, we need to remember that, as China’s greatest port city and largest multifunctional economic centre since the 1850s, Shanghai has been the major economic and cultural hub of the entire nation. Its rapid rise from the status of a small county town to that of “the largest metropolis in the Far East” and of the “Paris of the

East” (Zhang 2008) was due to the convergence of several factors: one was geographical, related to its position on the Yangzi estuary, which provided port facilities, a safe harbour and ready communication by waterways along the Yangzi as far as Sichuan province.

Another factor was economic, related to the food surplus produced in the fertile rice-growing region of the Yangzi delta and to the fact that Chinese brokers attracted capitals of landlord-gentry from the rich hinterland. Furthermore, the role of foreign government should not be overlooked, which guaranteed security and prosperity: Western merchants easily made money and enabled their Chinese assistants and counterparts to do the same.

From a management point of view, foreign powers established independent administrative, policing, and judicial institutions in the concession, with a certain degree of self-government; they stationed regular armed forces, used waterways, walls, iron fences, soldiers, and patrol guards with guns to separate the concession from the urban area, preventing the Chinese from entering and leaving at will (Zhou 1997).

In addition, there were many features of urban infrastructure and facilities in the concession that were rarely found in the traditional Chinese part of the city: modern paved streets, lighting, sewers, running water and public transport services. Foreigners enjoyed a high standard of living, based on a meat-centred diet, modern houses, stylish clothes, and leather footwear (Chen 2013). In this respect, Zhou Jiming, citing some articles published in the *Shenbao* 申报 – the most important newspaper in Shanghai at that time –,¹ stresses how Guo Songtao and Kang Youwei, who visited the city respectively in 1856 and 1879, were impressed by the “wonders” of modernity, especially the electric lighting, the maintenance of the streets, always kept clean and tidy (Zhou 1997). Metaphorically, modern districts were regarded as symbols of the supremacy of Western civilisation, while the traditional Chinese areas were seen as a sign of weakness. The state of the roads reflected this contrast – the old roads in the Chinese quarters were relatively narrow, uneven and dirty. They were built with mud or gravel and were dusty or muddy depending on the season.

Equally important, within the concession, were the rules for urban decorum: hanging laundry or placing household items on the facades of houses, for example, was strictly forbidden. According to the *Shenbao*, in the early 1870s fines and punishments were imposed for not respecting such rules of decorum, especially on

1 Considered the most significant Chinese-language newspaper of the time, the *Shenbao* was founded by a British businessman, Ernest Major (1841-1908), and started publication in the Shanghai International Settlement in 1872 (cf. Tsai 2009).

Chinese residents (Zhang 2008). The flourishing of a local press brought a further sense of modernity.

With regard to administration, the concession implemented the separation of powers: the legislative, the judicial, and the administrative were relatively independent and counterbalanced each other. Authority was exercised by the Council of Taxpayers, made up of all foreign residents subjected to the payment of taxes. However, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, they were only a small minority (between 5 and 10%) of the entire Chinese population (Zhou 1997). Chinese residents paid their taxes, but they lacked political representation, as would have been the case under the Chinese system.

Another noteworthy aspect was the observance of the principle of inviolability of private property and the protection of private entrepreneurship. In that way, the concessions also attracted domestic Chinese capital, thus creating the most developed area of capitalism in China (Zhou 1997).

Not to be overlooked is also the question of consular jurisdiction, which favored the introduction of Western criminal laws, in place of Chinese criminal law (Gong 2012). According to the unequal treaties, if there was a dispute between a Chinese and a foreign citizen, the peaceful mediators had to be identified by officials of the two countries. Cases involving Western subjects, regardless of person or property, were investigated and handled by foreign officials. Not being directly controlled by the Qing government and based on the principle of extraterritoriality, the concessions offered political asylum to personalities who wanted to escape the persecution of the Manchu court, for example Zhang Binglin, Yu Youren, Liu Shiwei. Besides refugees from impoverished or disaster-stricken areas who were looking for work, Shanghai sheltered about 1.5 million Chinese refugees after the Taiping rebellion in 1850, and many remained there even after the suppression of the uprising (Zhou 1997).

Another important aspect to consider is that, even though most of the aforementioned studies methodologically draw on the modernisation theory, they can also be connected, to some extent, to the 'impact-response theory' (*chongji-huiying lun* 冲击 - 回应论), proposed in the 1950s and 1960s by John K. Fairbank and the American scholars of the so-called 'Harvard School'. This theory has been questioned from a different perspective, adopted by several Chinese scholars since the 1990s: the so-called 'China-centred approach' (*Zhongguo zhongxin guan* 中国中心观) developed by Paul A. Cohen (1984).² According

² The first translation of Cohen's (Ke Wen in Chinese) book dates back to 1989 (Ke 1989). It was translated by Lin Tongqi, a Chinese historian who moved to the United States in 1984 and worked at Harvard University until his death in 2015.

to his vision, the ‘impact-response theory’ would have overestimated China’s encounter/clash with foreigners, conveying a marked dichotomy between a backward East and a dynamic West. The analysis of Harvard scholars indeed reveals how they are not immune from cultural biases and how they should be on alert for ethnocentric distortion. By contrast, Cohen suggests that the notion of ‘West’ is a mutable and relative concept, historically and geographically situated. Consequently, one could not look at the West as a whole, as a single entity that has a sole and unique impact on non-Western societies.

Though widely accepted by the Chinese academy (Wang, Lu 2007; Xiang 2013; Zhao, Zeng 2006), Cohen’s theory has also been questioned by some scholars who have highlighted its limits and shortcomings (Li 2010; Pan 2009; Xia 2006; Yi 2008; Zhu 2011). The ‘China-centred approach’, for instance, has been condemned for the fact that it dates the beginning of modern Chinese history back to the eighteenth or even the sixteenth century, asserting that China’s domestic political and social situation at that time would have largely defined the structural conditions of the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Invoking the concept of ‘transcendental historical continuity’, Cohen rewrites the historical modernisation process, blurring the boundary between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. In this way, the chasm that separates Chinese tradition from modernity is bridged and China is presented as stepping through an ‘innate path of modernisation’ which began in the sixteenth century; consequently, deliberately and unintentionally, the role of foreign powers would be underplayed and China’s self-determining continuity would be highlighted. It is precisely this weakening of the influence of foreign imperialism that is unacceptable to Chinese scholars, as much as the downsizing of the scope of the modernisation process.

3 The Dangers of ‘Historical Nihilism’

The different approaches and debates examined so far are a sign of the intellectual vitality that animated the Chinese academy during recent decades. However, since President Xi Jinping came to power, such liveliness has been extinguished, mostly as a result of tightening ideological control over Chinese universities. Xi’s campaign against historical nihilism (*lishi xuwuzhuyi* 历史虚无主义) has certainly been a step in this direction.

‘Historical nihilism’ is a term widely used to label any account that challenges CCP’s orthodox narratives or that brings into question the official interpretations of the country’s history. This epithet was first used by General Secretary Jiang Zemin in 1989, when he condemned what he considered harmful tendencies then prevailing within the Party (Wang 2018). Many years later, President Xi Jinping has returned

to this concept with greater emphasis, defining it as a major misrepresentation of the history of the Communist Party and of the People's Republic, and one of several ideological vices that had 'seriously eroded' the CCP. According to Xi, historical nihilism would completely deny Marxism, the leadership of the Party, and the Chinese socialist system, undermining the foundation of CCP ideology (Xi 2016).

Historical nihilism has also been recorded among seven false ideological trends, the so-called 'Seven Unmentionables' (*qige bu yao jiang* 七个不要讲, or *qi bu jiang* 七不讲), listed within an internal (*neibu* 内部) CCP document, the "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" (*ChinaFile* 2013). The document called on all media and government educational bodies to consider seven serious problems that deserved attention and that reflected the harshness and complexity of the struggle in the ideological sphere. The current Party leadership has indeed outlined 'seven speak-nots', subjects that are off-limits for academic discussion: universal values, civil society, civil rights, judicial independence, press freedom, the privileged capitalist class, and the Party's historical mistakes. And it is precisely to the latter that historical nihilism can be ascribed. In rejecting the official version that the CCP provides of its own history, historical nihilism would try to question the historical mission of the Party, contesting its legitimacy. Furthermore, close adherence to Western thought and ideas (especially political ones) could undermine the stability of the Communist regime.

In addition to the press and media, the 2013 provisions also applied to the academy: as early as 2014, a survey conducted by the Party press in more than 20 faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Shenyang, denounced disrespectful lecturers and professors for presenting a distorted image of Chinese history and culture, throwing mud at the nation and glorifying the West (*Liaoning Ribao* 2014).

Furthermore, in 2019, an editorial of the *People's Daily* appealed to Chinese experts to free their research on the Qing period from the harmful influence of foreign historical nihilism (Zhou 2019). The appeal was welcomed by many Chinese scholars and academics: according to Li Shizhen, a professor at Inner Mongolia Agricultural University, historical nihilism manifests itself in resenting the Western invasion as a means to promote the modernisation of China, and in disguising the real aims of imperialism as a stimulus to the progress of Chinese civilisation (Li 2020). The potential intellectual danger of the modernisation theory is also denounced by Wang Xiaowen, from Beijing Language and Culture University, who stresses the necessity to strictly adhere to the analytical framework of historical and dialectical materialism (Wang 2017).

Zhao Xue and Han Sheng, professors at Shandong University and the Hebei Institute of Finance respectively, argue that the paradigm

of modernity is the result of the colonisation produced by the cultural imperialism of the West, whose hegemonic discourse is applied to the history of non-European contexts (Zhao, Han 2020).

The tendency towards historical nihilism has also been identified in some analyses related to foreign concessions. Particularly vocal in criticising this trend is Shen Bingqing, a professor at Fudan University: in his study on the Shanghai concession, the scholar contends that the International Settlement should not be viewed as a closed space with an efficient governance system, as often defined by those analysts that emphasise its management efficacy (Shen 2018). Conversely, Shen judges the governance of the Shanghai International Settlement to be ineffective, also questioning its legal legitimacy, as it is derived from unequal treaties. For Shen, inefficiencies could be found at the administrative, financial, and jurisdictional levels, for example in the conflicts between European consuls and foreign taxpayers. But they are most evident in relation to the Chinese residents, who suffered racial discrimination. Furthermore, the European administrative model is considered to be responsible for hindering the development of modern associations and local enterprises, hampering the replacement of traditional organisations and jobs.

In conclusion, due to this kind of analysis, which presents a 'correct' and unilateral vision of history, the lively debates of the past decades, mostly based on scholarly conversations between Chinese and Western academic communities, have been completely silenced. This trend is extremely worrying, since it marks a turning point for independent research, which has always been one of the main targets of Party censorship, but is now encountering unprecedented difficulties.

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