

THE AGE OF OPENNESS

China before Mao

Frank Dikötter



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1 Introduction

Sir John Plumb, one of the great social historians of the eighteenth century, once said that bland consensus does not do much to advance historical knowledge, and consequently that there is little point in accumulating facts within agreed frameworks of explanation. When we turn to the history of modern China, one of the most pervasive approaches in popular and scholarly accounts written during the Cold War was to take revolution as the key to historical change, so much so that ‘revolutionary China’ and modern China were often synonymous.¹ ‘Opium Wars’, ‘Unequal Treaties’ and ‘Peasant Rebellions’, seen from such a perspective, are harbingers of decline in the nineteenth century, but the heart of darkness lies between the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and the Civil War of 1946–1949. An enfeebled Qing is unable to resist the ‘carving up’ of China by imperialist powers following its defeat in 1895, while a ‘Boxer Rebellion’ shakes the very foundations of the empire, which soon collapses into chaos. Conventional wisdom has it that after the fall of the Qing in 1911 a weak and corrupt central government dependent on foreign loans is quickly succeeded by a string of rival ‘warlords’ who bribe, coerce, plot and fight their way to power, as ‘China disintegrates’. A measure of political unification, we were told, is achieved by the Nationalist Party (Guomindang) in 1927, but endemic corruption, inept policies, political dissension, continued warfare and economic depression only deepen the country’s predicament, popular unrest and peasant immiseration fuelling the success of the Communist Party. Continuous encroachments by imperialist powers culminate in the country’s occupation by Japan after 1937, followed by a full-scale war between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party from 1946 to 1949. ‘Liberation’ at last

closes a sombre chapter in the history of the country, as unification by Mao Zedong brings to an end a long series of humiliations: 'China Has Stood Up'.

Teleology held this approach together. Because so much of the history of the twentieth century seemed to have been about revolution, students tended to look for the 'causes', 'roots', 'stages' and 'origins' of communism.² Revolution provided the key for deciding which facts were historically relevant and which were not, a grid through which a unitary understanding of modern China could be created. So entrenched was this approach that even the study of famine, which could potentially have contributed to a critical assessment of the republican era, was neglected: as Sugata Bose has suggested, 'historians of Vietnam and China tend to write more about rebellion and revolution: those of India about fatalism and famines'.³ 'Imperialism', 'warlords', 'corrupt officials', 'local tyrants', 'peasant immiseration' and 'social disintegration' used to be some of the categories through which historians tried to understand the republican era. As a result, we have a historiography rich on 'exploitation', counterbalanced only recently by work on charity; it is abundant on 'communism', even if work on democracy has steadily been growing; there are gangsters, warlords and prostitutes in abundance, and only gradually are we gaining new insights on polyglot diplomats, returned migrants and businesswomen. And despite many rapid changes in the field of modern history, even today attempts to move away from the conventional wisdom can be met with disapproval: when Fu Zhengyuan devoted an entire book to autocratic politics in China but included four pages on the liberal traditions which appeared before the communist takeover, an otherwise sympathetic reviewer accused him of being 'one-sided' in overlooking the 'dark side' of republican China.⁴

Although variations of this bleak image can still be found in popular accounts, many professional historians have for some time shown that there was far more to the republican era than mere chaos and warfare. Even John K. Fairbank, a proponent of the 'history as revolution' approach, described the period as a republic of paradoxes, as culture, for instance, flourished despite constant

warfare. More recent historians such as Parks Coble, Sherman Cochran, William C. Kirby, Mary B. Rankin and Thomas Rawski — to name but a few — have immeasurably enriched our understanding of republican China, while many scholars from Taiwan and the PRC have been approaching the period in a very open way for almost twenty years. A remarkably diverse and cosmopolitan period is increasingly gaining recognition from historians working in fields as diverse as diplomacy and religion. Efforts to document modern China's overwhelming impulse to join the world and open up its borders, minds and markets have been mounting for some time, although we still lack an integrated account illustrating the sheer extent and depth of the country's openness before communism. This book uses a variety of primary sources and a highly informative body of secondary literature to challenge the view that modern China was mainly defined by 'warlords', 'imperialism' or 'disintegration': it suggests instead that in many respects it might very well be qualified as a golden age of engagement with the world. People, things and ideas moved in and out of the republican era, as global flows fostered an unprecedented degree of diversity which has yet to be appreciated in standard history textbooks: globalisation, rather than revolution, appears — with the benefit of hindsight — to have been the driving force of the half-century before the Cold War. The point of this book is not to provide exhaustive evidence for this view, but to avoid bland consensus, provoke critical thought and encourage readers to think creatively: in many cases footnotes refer to detailed research monographs which offer much fuller arguments, while future avenues for research are opened up in all chapters.

Chapter 2 indicates that even if the central government is often believed to have been weak in republican China, it displayed considerable elements of continuity in terms of political vision, administrative practice and government personnel. It also examines the growth of participatory politics and political diversity, from the electorate of 40 million in 1912 to the fully democratic constitution of 1947. It shows how the number of associations and organisations set up independently from the government, from chambers of commerce to beggar unions, increased drastically, and how well over

a thousand dailies, weeklies or monthlies circulated already in the 1920s, often published in the treaty ports under the aegis of foreign extraterritoriality. We will see how sustained efforts at legal reform, which included sophisticated legal codification and widespread legal expertise, also contributed to a much more open environment, despite many abuses of judicial independence and judicial administration, which were openly noted and discussed by contemporary critics and government officials alike. Governance, in short, was far more open during the republican period than is usually accepted.

Chapter 3 examines how individuals from all backgrounds, whether ordinary farmers or privileged students, were interested in the world beyond their community, while the opening of the borders led to growing movement of people in and out of the country. Some cultivated distinctly cosmopolitan lifestyles, whether it was the emigrant building a modern house on his return from decades of hard labour overseas, the student publishing in a foreign language after completing graduate work abroad or the diplomat who elected domicile in a foreign concession after years of service in Washington or Geneva. The flow went both ways, and many foreigners did not merely visit China, but made it their home: the second part of this chapter shows how foreign communities were part of the social texture of republican life and should be considered as an integral part of the social history of the country.

Chapter 4 is the most important, and looks at the cultural and social aspects of China's cosmopolitan age. Open borders resulted not only in large flows of people moving in and out of the country, but also in active participation in international conferences and international covenants. Several bilingual lawyers became judges at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, while educated professionals were able to match their foreign peers in many other fields, ranging from avionics to zoology. Ordinary people too were often familiar with the world beyond their community, as illustrated magazines and radio programmes disseminated information about every aspect of the modern world, whether new agricultural techniques or the fluctuating price of silk on the international

market. A global outlook was also promoted by the many modern schools which appeared after 1900, as even small establishments deep inside the hinterland introduced their students to the biographies of great foreign figures like Lincoln, Washington, Napoleon, Watt and Edison. Needless to say that a mere handful of students went on to pursue careers as consuls and ambassadors abroad, while only a fraction of the population was fully literate, but opportunities for education were more diverse than ever before, as government organisations, private societies and religious associations, funded by local elites, merchant guilds or foreign benefactors, contributed to the spread of new ideas. Religious expression was also allowed to thrive in a climate of relative tolerance, while culture bloomed in the absence of a monopoly on power and knowledge.

How about the economy? It is not the purpose of Chapter 5 to review all the debates about economic growth in republican China, but merely to underline that economic activities were relatively unhindered in comparison to those closely monitored under imperial and communist regimes. Technological transfers were greatly facilitated by an open society at all levels, whether local workmen building truck bodies to fit imported engines in Beijing or the engineers instructed by Belgian specialists at a cloth-making industry established in distant Lanzhou even before the fall of the empire. The free flow of goods not only transformed the material culture of everyday life (one thinks of rubber galoshes and enamelled washbasins), as a huge range of goods appeared which would not be matched for decades under communism, but it also encouraged the appearance of highly diversified local industries plugged into a much larger global market. The economy was not 'stagnant' or 'regressing' from 1870 to 1930, but steadily growing and thriving, even in the countryside. Human enterprise may have been frustrated by civil war or local officials, but it proliferated even in the hinterland.

Communism and, ironically, nationalism have seen openness as a cause of decline in republican China. However, we now have the critical distance, the archival material and the secondary literature to question this view. While it is certainly true that not all regions benefited equally from the phenomenal changes described in this

book, the image of a war-torn, enfeebled if not starving China which comes from the more deprived areas is very much the exception rather than the norm. Whether or not a poor republic is better than a mediocre dictatorship is open to debate, but the diversity of prerevolutionary China surely deserves due recognition. Now that globalisation, rather than 'revolution', has become the guiding issue for the present, from Latin America to India and China, the oft-forgotten cosmopolitan experience of the republican era is of even greater relevance.

6

Conclusion

Glasnost in the Soviet Union, *kaifang* in China or *doi moi* in Vietnam: ‘openness’ in socialist states has become such an inflated term of political propaganda that one tends to forget that prerevolutionary regimes were often marked by a much higher degree of cosmopolitanism. In Russia, as Jeffrey Brooks reminds us, the Bolsheviks inherited an empire in which not only political elites were in tune with the rest of Europe and the United States, but the newly literate farmers sought out an increasingly cosmopolitan culture in film and fiction, while foreign models dominated in politics, the economy was open to the world and international practice was accommodated in fields ranging from corporate banking to human rights.¹ In the case of China, as this book has argued, the period from 1900 to 1949 was characterised by engagement with the world at all levels of society, and the pursuit of openness was particularly evident in four areas, namely in governance and the advance of the rule of law and of newly acquired liberties; in freedom of movement in and out of the country; in open minds thriving on ideas from the humanities and sciences; and in open markets and sustained growth in the economy. The era between empire and communism is routinely portrayed as a catastrophic interlude in the country’s modern history, but this book, built on the strength of a growing secondary literature, indicates instead that while there is always a pull between closure and openness in all societies at all times, the extent and depth of engagement with the rest of the world was such that we can see closure under Mao instead as the exception. As in Russia under Stalin, China under Mao witnessed the disintegration of international links in economics, politics and culture, a gradual closure of minds which constituted a radical reversal in everyday

experience rather than the continuation of a long tradition. Why this happened is a question which transcends the limits of this book: after all, communists in the republican era profited as much if not more than others from an open environment, from shopping for military hardware in Shanghai and training abroad to receiving extensive assistance from Soviet advisors.

If the Maoist period is an aberration rather than the gravity point in the modern history of China, could we go a step further and instead of interpreting the last two or three centuries as a tale of unstoppable progress towards ‘revolution’, from the ‘Opium Wars’ to the ‘Cultural Revolution’, see it as an unfolding embrace of the world, an intensification of global connectivity, a gradual increase in the flow of people, goods, ideas, institutions and techniques? This approach would certainly be supported by new evidence about the imperial period, as a number of historians increasingly argue in favour of a secular trend towards openness which would have started many centuries ago. In *The Open Empire*, for instance, Valerie Hansen depicts the country as dynamic, vibrant and open to outside influences throughout its history rather than as a hermit kingdom indifferent to foreign lands.² Joanna Waley-Cohen, too, highlights how there was a longstanding tradition of extensive interaction with the outside world: it was not so much splendid isolation which was pursued throughout the country’s long history, but ideas, goods and techniques from outside, ranging from the ‘early cosmopolitanism’ of the Han and the Tang to the Ming and Qing’s fascination with science, technology and astronomy from Europe.³ The empire energetically engaged with the rest of the world, often encouraging the circulation of foreign goods and ideas — in contrast to the hoary stereotype of a xenophobic China opposed to all things foreign.

Even if we debunk the myth of a monolithic empire ensconced behind its walls in favour of a more nuanced approach which highlights the many global connections established by a multicultural empire during the last centuries of its existence, the first half of the twentieth century saw a qualitatively unprecedented intensification of this trend towards openness. Freedom of association, freedom to travel, freedom of religion, freedom to trade and relative freedom

of speech, as we have seen, wrought profound changes in the texture of everyday life, from the appearance of huge metropolises to a lively press, while the introduction of the rule of law, constitutional government, democratic elections and oppositional politics constituted an extraordinary transformation of the realm of politics. Participatory politics may very well have been coupled with what appeared to be political instability in the eyes of observers who favoured firm rule from above, just as exposure to international commerce could cause the periodic financial instabilities deplored by proponents of trade protection, but the sheer depth and scale of engagement with the rest of the world was without precedent. And globalisation, as this book has argued, was a vector of cultural diversification, which, in turn, was best supported by increased globalisation: pre-existing constellations of ideas, practices and institutions did not simply vanish on contact with the rest of the world, but on the contrary expanded and diversified even further, just as much as local industries diversified thanks to their inclusion into a much larger global market. We have seen how voluntary associations boomed, newspapers and magazines flourished, intellectual activities burgeoned, foreign communities grew and material culture was enriched, leading to ever more complex and rapidly shifting social and cultural arrangements, in turn enhanced by elements of political pluralism. Arguably the country was at its most diverse in its entire history on the eve of World War II — in terms of politics, society, culture and economy.

If openness is a key characteristic of the country's long history of engagement with the rest of the world, can we interpret the 'Open Door' policy since 1978 as a return to a tradition of engagement with the world? The most common reservation is that the recent overture of markets and minds has not been matched by political reform, as the party leadership has repeatedly rejected the need for democratic practices and proclaimed the superiority of a system based on communist rule: with vigorous economic growth these views are unlikely to be substantially altered. The optimistic interpretation, however, argues that increased interdependence with the rest of the world might eventually lead to participatory politics and the rule of

law, while on the other hand the pessimistic view points at the use of a relative degree of economic openness to shore up the power of a privileged elite at the expense of the civil liberties of ordinary people. Whatever the case may be, the overlooked cosmopolitan experience of the republican era is of even greater relevance today, now that even in the People's Republic globalisation rather than revolution has become the guiding issue for the twenty-first century.

Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 The focus of this short study is the period from 1911 to 1949, usually referred to as republican China, but frequent mention is made of the New Policies initiated after the defeat of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and the reforms which followed in the wake of the 1895 Shimonoseki peace settlement: the era from 1895 to 1949 I loosely refer to as ‘modern China’.
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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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