

# Differentiating Chinese from Western Modernity: The Modern Reconstruction of Transnationalism in Chinese Cities from 1850 to 1950

*Giordan Kazemi*

When examining the relationship between any form of socio-political organization and the concept of modernity, scholars ought to be careful. The scale of entity one chooses to evaluate in terms of what is modern and what is not might reveal certain biases projected by that author. Joseph Esherick in his chapter titled “Modernity and Nation in the Chinese City” in *Remaking the Chinese City*, discusses the tension between nation and modernity, making the claim that perpetual change as a consequence of constant capitalist transformation of space threatens to dismantle those spaces occupied by symbols of national heritage in which the myths of an imagined community manifest themselves (1). But it can often be problematic to adequately define modernity in such a way that there is a popular consensus, as reflected by a proceeding look at Meng Yue’s work. By evaluating Esherick’s and Yue’s discourses on modernity, we can see attention given to different aspects. Esherick and Yue both offer critical analysis of modernity and national identity in the context of Chinese cities. But Yue’s observations offer a crucial dynamic by separating Western colonial narratives from narratives on Chinese identity and modernity. By doing this, we find that transnationalism and cross-cultural influences are not new to Chinese cities, but are actually an integral characteristic of an existing Chinese identity.

Esherick seems to place a greater focus on “modern capitalist production” and its relationship with the “economic and political spheres” (6); whereas Yue, in *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire*, challenges notions of modernity by explaining the metropolitan “transnational” character of imperial Yangzhou, despite the belief amongst many that these are traits particular to the West (169). Both authors focus on the scale of the city. This is an ideal scale of social, political, and economic organization because the city comfortably belongs in both antiquity and in modernity. This is unlike the nation, where tensions between the past and present are always far greater. The authors share many of the same points on changing landscapes of Chinese cities by the late imperial Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the final days of Nationalist China on the mainland (1912-1949) and how the use

of space fundamentally changed. Both indicate the tension between the nation and modernity in these spaces and how the modern city came to form out of this tension. However, Yue offers critical insight into the scope of colonialism and imperialism allowing readers to separate colonial preconceptions from narratives regarding modernity and the reconstruction, rather than introduction, of transnationalism, which facilitated modernity in Chinese cities.

Esherick begins by noting the observation amongst Westerners in the later years of the Qing dynasty that all Chinese cities were close to the same in appearance and functionality (2). It is implied that these cities are the pre-modern or traditional Chinese cities, defined by controlled movement, regulated spaces and retro linear grid layout (Esherick 1). Following political-economic incursions into China by Western imperialist powers (1839-42 and 1856-60), the collapse of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), the subsequent birth of Nationalist China (1912-1949), and the efforts to industrialize that came to follow, we see a variety of categorically similar cities arise, variegating the Chinese landscape.

It was around this point when questions began to arise over what is modern, what is Chinese, and what is modern Chinese. As earlier noted, "modern Chinese" is a loaded statement because its conceptual basis is being constantly constructed and reconstructed. Facilitating movement, capitalist production, public hygiene, and *internationalism* are primary components of the modern city in Esherick's analysis (7). The modern city should have a fundamental purpose in serving the public with the establishment of various public works projects, and architecture should now serve economic productivity and practical function (Esherick 9). Some of these points constitute transformative breaks from the traditional Chinese city, but Yue posits that some ideas, most importantly early transnationalism as a precursor to later internationalism, can be found in the so-called pre-modern Chinese cities as well.

Yue describes the Imperial City of Yangzhou as an example of a transnationalism that existed within Chinese society before the arrival of Western conceptions of modernity. Describing interiors of the urban gardens owned by wealthy merchant-officials involved in the salt monopoly, Yue notes the diverse transnational tastes in design and décor originating from various corners of the known world (143). "This 'Yangzhou before Shanghai' formula highlights the existence of an earlier, Asia-based cross-cultural urban space that thrived a century or more before the flowering of 'world cities' in the heart of modern capitalism" (Yue 140). It is on this basis that we must be careful in delineating our notions of modernity from European colonial preconceptions. To say that Chinese cities were closed off from external cultural influences would be disregarding the transnational spaces curated by an elite Chinese class fascinated with the exotic and foreign. To an extent, the internationalization of Chinese cities was already in process long before the adoption of Western influenced modernization campaigns. One might assert that transnationalism is an integral part of Chinese identity and pre-modern history, rather than just a component of Western modernity, and this transnationalism would be a precursor to a later internationalism. It is in this capacity that Yue's discourse separates European colonial narratives from narratives regarding modernity and Chinese identity by mending past Chinese identities with the present.

Apart from pointing out the biases intrinsic in colonial conceptions of modernity, Yue also contributes to the defining factors facilitating reconstruction in the modern Chinese city.

Utilizing the Zhang garden in Shanghai as an example, Yue distinguishes pre-modern Chinese cosmopolitanism and transnationalism from what transformed into a modern form of political awareness and internationalism. Beginning as a space emulating the spirit of the transnationalism in earlier Yangzhou gardens, owner Zhang Honglu captured the European “essence” as the foundation of his garden’s design (Yue 158). As colonial aggression and political upheaval reshaped the Chinese polity profoundly in the early twentieth century, this private space transformed into a public space and became a host to political activism steeped in nationalistic fervour (Yue 163-164). It was this transformation that would define a new type of public space to be found in the modern Chinese city. In these spaces, Chinese people would gather to advance political goals that were predicated on a modern Chinese nation, rather than dynastic imperialism. Colonial influence was rejected in favour of terms akin to “self-governing” and “freedom” (Yue 165). Public spaces once purposed for entertainment and past imperial expressions of transnationalism transformed into political activism propagating modern notions of nations and identity. Transnationalism, itself, was not new to Chinese cities, but the transformation into self-awareness of nation and place under a paradigm of internationalism in the contemporary world order was.

This transformation of transnationalism in the Chinese city sheds light on the modern Chinese dilemma. Modernity cannot be understood as the propagation of ideals disseminated through agents of European civilization in the context of colonialism. If we are to consider the validity of the existence of transnationalism and, by extension, other characteristics of modernity to have existed in the Chinese polity before incursions by European empires, then we can logically deduce the pre-existing relationships between modernity and China. It is through this lens we can grasp a more complete picture of the transformations that have occurred in Chinese cities. There is no question that ideas of nationalism and nation-state were diffused through foreign concessions in Chinese cities. However, by recognizing conceptions of modernity to have existed in imperial Chinese cities, the nature of interactions that would transform the constitution of Chinese cities can be better understood as endogenous and relational, rather than imposed and/or wholly foreign.

By examining Chinese modernity through a paradigm of relational endogenous growth as opposed to the often stark dichotomies of pre-modern and modern, academics will utilize a less reductionist conception of modernity in China and understand transformative phenomena in Chinese cities as a process that was far more dynamic. This will be achieved by observing not only the diffusion of modern ideals from colonial empires, but also the transformation of pre-existing components of modernity through a relational process of reaction and interaction that had taken place in spaces of transition. Informed by Esherick’s discourse on the content of modernity and Yue’s study on pre-existing elements of modernity in Yangzhou, the transformative processes in Chinese cities could thus be identified as *reconstruction*. Modernity was not a substance that had filled a void in Chinese cities, but was a relational concept that was (re)constructed amidst the tensions and interactions that had long existed in public spaces.

Esherick and Yue both offer critical analysis of modernity and national identity in the context of Chinese cities. But Yue’s observations offer a crucial dynamic by separating Western colonial narratives from narratives on Chinese identity and modernity. By doing this, we find that transnationalism and cross-cultural influences are not new to Chinese cities, but are actually an integral characteristic of an existing Chinese identity. Instead, what is uniquely modern in this scope would be the transformation of the relationship between

space, people and the international; pre-existing elements of modernity manifested in transnational spaces in Chinese cities were reconstructed into an awareness of nation and relationships among nations. This is not Esherick's internationalization, but the reconstruction of an existing transnationalism predicated on the idea of a modern Chinese nation-state and its position in the new colonial world order. The example of Zhang's garden helps us understand how the modernization of public spaces in Chinese cities was not only an effort to emulate the advanced European nations, but also a reaction to their social, political, and economic clout.

## Works Cited

Esherick, Joseph. "Modernity and Nation in the Chinese City". *Remaking the Chinese City*, U of Hawaii P, 1999, pp. 1-16. Web.

Yue, Meng. *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire*. U of Minnesota P, 2006, pp. 139-209. Print.