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Introduction (2)

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Introduction

- 1 My fluid thinking began when Professor Laurence-Berger invited me to co-edit a panel of articles on Chinese Temporalities for the French academic journal *Temporalités*, centering on the relationship between the concept of Chinese temporalities and the several manifestations of China as a modern, national, political entity. I myself define the concept of temporalities in terms of its methodological meanings, by emphasizing its multidimensional nature: first of all, the concept of temporalities becomes one of the most original explanatory strategies, which means that understanding or grasping the current situation and/or the future direction a certain affair/occurrence/event will take depends on our extensive representations of the sequencing of a time entity, a restoration of a singular time order, in the course of which those theoretical elements, may they be critical, structural, or functional, are all recognized and acknowledged in a holistic fashion. Secondly, the principle of temporality becomes a predominant, methodological imperative in that it eventually stands out as a natural prerequisite on the part of researchers to discern how many temporal or historical processes have been put in place in their assorted, simultaneous shaping and framing of a complex reality on a truly social scientific scene, when empirical explorations are ongoing. Digging deep into multi-temporality as a methodological principle helped us to pay attention to the “controlled” or “regulated” nature of human agency when observing cases of its realization/representation and trying to provide a thorough explanation. Thirdly, it should be noticed that, in the sense of a relational time-space connection, we can perceive temporalities as a continuum represented by eventual spatial changes, and acknowledging that grasping Temporalities can be achieved through the juxtaposition, transformation, and reconstruction of spatial representations.
- 2 After a careful reading of the papers and detailed abstracts submitted by a group of Chinese, Korean, and French scholars, I carried out a rough analysis based on one of the

key indicators, i.e. the time extension, or time breadth, of those empirical cases and of the theoretical frameworks that the authors used to advance their theoretical arguments. Thus, in the following text, I will briefly introduce why this focus on Chinese temporalities is problematic, and which are more accurate, when we touch upon the concept of Chinese Temporality in its ontological sense.

Positioning

- 3 I am quite familiar with the critical themes that these papers convey through their unique styles of writing, and even appreciate them, in the first place because they somehow challenged directly some of the most salient social injustices that unfolded during the course of Chinese Reform and Open over the past four decades. What impressed me most was the concept of “complex risk society” coined by Dr. Chang of the department of sociology, SNU, based on his other conceptualization, “compressed modernity”. His comparative analysis of South Korea and China as both being complex risk societies, has touched base on the symptom of an ill-developed Chinese modernity, while failing to explain why Chinese modernity is “problematic” (or “so unique”) in the first place. He sharply noticed that both countries, China and South Korea, had encountered a fast-paced modernization (or compressed modernity) in the economic domain, and also admitted that the experiences of transformation, from a socialist to a post-socialist society, has made China’s a much more complex modernity than South Korea’s. My personal impression is that Chang’s paper has a strong flavor of humanism, and can be seen as an ideal representative of the so-called natural crystallization of humanism: that is to say, his paper examines the class-based, unequal human conditions (such as the social origins of disasters and social risks, and the unequal opportunities that people from different class background enjoy in terms of their capacity to flee the threats of natural disasters and social risks), as against the fast modernization processes of both China and South Korea. Thus, I define his paper’s time framework of Chinese temporalities as the nearly 40 years of post-socialist transformation from 1979 to 2017, and the ontological theoretical framework he used is basically a special form of humanism.
- 4 Ji Yingchun’s paper discusses how gender relations and the marriage system in contemporary China were institutionalized under the theoretical metaphor of Chinese temporalities, and asserts that the four temporalities—patriarchy, capitalism, socialist practices (and its legacies)—, and new liberalism, have jointly shaped the modern forms of Chinese gender relations and marriage. From the point of view of contemporary feminism (except for the racial element), this theoretical framework is quite holistic. Ji Yingchun not only used the concept of “compressed modernity” that Chang initiated, but also employed a similar time framework, i.e., the 40-year-transformation from a socialist centralized economy to a market economy. Of course, the theoretical framework applied by Ji Yingchun is feminism.
- 5 Judith Audin’s paper on the urban renewal plan of the city of Datong driven by the state owned enterprise Tongmei (Datong Coal Mine) Group, shares a lot with Ji’s paper, in that their methodological treatments of the Chinese temporality are quite similar: they both explore the multi-temporalities in their respective narratives, spatial inequality in the process of Chinese urbanization (Audin’s), and gender inequality in the process of Chinese

modernization (Ji's), although their field methods are quite different (ethnography for Audin, and case-driven theorization for Ji).

- 6 Specifically speaking, the four temporalities that Ji Yingchun has identified are: patriarchy that originated some 5000 years ago, capitalism that evolved some 500 years ago, the Chinese gender revolution that lasted for at least 60 years, and new liberalism which has gained its popularity in China for about 40 years. For Judith Audin, the three temporalities that she relied on as her main analytical framework are: the cyclical price fluctuation of coal as a globalized commodity in the past two decades, the thrive and decline of Chinese, state-owned industrialization (and its efforts at reform) in the last 60 years, as symbolized by the rise and fall of a planned economy and the work-unit system that accompanied it, and the broad, social history of rural-urban massive migration and subsequent urban renewal projects in almost every city in the past 40 years. Although there are cross-era, grand theoretical entities such as patriarchy and capitalism in Ji Yinchun's multi-temporality, the time-breadth of her theoretical narrative is still at the same level as Audin's: the same historicity, that is, the market transition, has not only pushed women in China to face the fact of a multi-layered labor market, but also pushed SOEs like the Tongmei Group to face the fierce competition from multi market players, such as domestic private coal mines, and an international future market specializing in raw materials including coal.
- 7 Pun Ngai and Guo Yuhua are two representative critical sociologists of contemporary Chinese sociology. Pun Ngai and Zhang Huipeng also used the concept of "compressed modernity" borrowed from Chang in their analysis of an industrial entity, Foxconn in Shenzhen. This paper, starting from the conceptualization of "global commodity chain" as the time-space particularity of the defining characteristic of the current phase of globalization, responds to the eternal theme of the Human Condition in general, and the plight of China's second and third generations of migrant workers specifically, from the perspective of another special form of humanism. Similarly, Guo Yuhua has carried out a delicate case analysis, in order to illustrate an imbalanced relationship between the State and individual citizens, by tracing a series of connected human actions: owning (or deprivation), defining (through legal procedures), and defending (through individual or collective actions), centered on the proposition of housing as an elementary form of property, by connecting this individual agency with the awakening of an ideology of citizens' rights, based on her own personal encounters with the housing system. As measured with the concept of time breadth, the former paper is based on the industrial landscape of the last three decades, and the latter paper has established its narrative scheme on a 60-year time framework, from the socialist reconstruction of the early 1950s, to the real-estate marketization of the late 1990s through the early 2000s.
- 8 And finally, there is Chen Jin's brilliant paper on the intersection of the material and social worlds in a specific locality in South Jiangsu, where local neighborhoods build up a meaningful life-world by incorporating the local water system into local social memories. It becomes an ideal case representing my third way of demonstrating temporalities, that is, marking a time process by spatial changes. Apparently, the time breadth of Chen's paper is similar to local people's length of social memory, up to 80 years or more, and social constructionism becomes the hidden theoretical framework of this paper.

Table 1 An analysis of the papers: Time-Breadth and Theoretical Frameworks

Author	Main Topic	Time-Breadth	Theoretical Framework
Chang, Kyung-Sup	China as a complex risk society, and the comparison of China with South Korea	40 years of post-socialist transformation from 1979 to 2017	A special form of humanism
Ji, Yingchun	The modern form of China's gender and marriage system	60 years of transformation from a centralized socialist economy to a market economy	A special form of feminism
Judith Audin	The spatial transformation that a SOE in Datong has been involved in	60 years of Chinese industrialization and its latest reform	A political economy of space transformation
Pun Ngai & Huipeng Zhang	The plight (hidden injury of class) of migrant workers in an industrial entity	40 years of industrial reform since 1979	Labor rights as a special form of humanism
Guo, Yuhua	Housing politics and collective actions based on collective property rights	60-years, from the socialist reconstruction of the early 1950s, to the housing marketization of the late 1990s to early 2000s	State centralism
Chen, Jin	The reinvention of spatial images as a way to cultural revival and conservation	80 years of narrated, personal, social memories of a local history	Social constructionism

Criticism and a New Paradigm

- 9 Two criticisms emerge after my positioning. First of all, all the authors have used a limited time breadth in their way of constructing contemporary Chinese temporalities in their respective papers. The most popular time framework is either 40 or 60-years, which I deem far too narrow for explaining the Chinese situation in a modern sense. Secondly, the theoretical frameworks that these authors have employed in their analysis are either Western in nature, such as humanism and feminism, or borrowed from a specific type of time-space factor, the so-called “compressed modernity” that one of the authors, Chang, proposed. The flaw of a narrow time perspective lies in the fact that Chinese modernity starts not in 1928, or 1949, but exists since 1840; and Chinese modernity is not only compressed, but also survivalist/salvationist¹ in its ontological nature. Thus, I will

develop my own understanding of contemporary Chinese temporalities, based on a time breadth of about 180-years since 1840, and a new theorization of Chinese modernity.

- 10 The defeat of the 1840 Opium War proved to be a national humiliation, and the defeat of the Qing Navy by the Japanese Navy in 1895 marked an organizational failure of China's Westernization movement, which itself was seen as a major institutional response to the 1840 defeat. Since then, various social and political forces (actors) inside China, such as those reformists within the Qing empire's political hierarchy, those capitalist revolutionaries (such as Doctor Sun Yat-Sen), or people who put their hopes in the victory of the Russian Revolution of 1919, have launched various sociopolitical experiments aiming to lead China out of the trap of successive defeats and national humiliation. Basically speaking, to save China from being colonized, and to find a new road to cultural revival, became a core theme of modern Chinese history.
- 11 Thus my ontological understanding of Chinese temporality has at least three layers of components: the first layer is a temporality of humiliation and defeat when facing paramount threats of colonization after the famous first Opium War of 1840, and a profound sense of self-skepticism over Chinese civilization when the so-called Westernization movement (literally, to learn from the West) collapsed during the great defeat of 1895; the second layer is a temporality of successive explorations and experiments, with the adoption of constitutional monarchism, democratic capitalism, Marxism and the Soviet style of planned economy consecutively. The third layer more or less echoes the time framework of our authors, a structural transformation from the planned economy to a market economy, while at the same time maintaining a salient political continuity, that is, the acknowledgment and maintenance of the legitimacy of the CCP as the leading political authority for this vast country.
- 12 The key to these multi-layered Chinese temporalities is their survivalist or self-salvationist flavor, that is to say, all the modernization efforts within this time context aim at the survival or salvation of a great nation and its great civilization from the invasion and colonization of the world powers of the time. Almost every single episode of social mobilization in the Chinese modern era echoes this basic motivation. I would like to propose an event history analysis to elucidate the nature of the survivalist modernity that accompanies the great story of China's national revival.
- 13 First of all, it was the foundation of the new China in 1949, with the CCP replacing the KMT as a new leading political force on this continent. What was behind this fundamental political change was Chinese people's willingness to welcome a new ideology based on social justice and collective altruism. It marked at the same time both an end and a new beginning for China's continuing social experiments aiming at national salvation. Secondly, right after the Korean War broke out, China had to give up its planned, slow and gradual road toward socialist transformation (it was termed a new-democratic transformation of the society) and began to implement a very unexpected and different method of rapid, heavy industrialization in order to win a fierce war against the rest of the world (under the name of a US-led UN alliance force). The Soviet style of economic management was thus imported into the country with this military-oriented pattern of fast, heavy industrialization. The third most important, while at the same time still neglected event, was that, throughout the 1960s, China was the only national, political entity who fought against the two world powers, USA and Soviet Union, at the same time. In order to survive, in this huge crisis of international relations, China launched a series of national mobilization campaigns, including Collectivization, the Cultural Revolution,

and Third-Front Construction, which could be respectively seen as its economic, political, and military strategies/responses to the hidden crisis. This series of survivalist movements, at first glance, seems to be either misled decision-making due to internal competition over political leadership within the CCP, or a rational response to a financial crisis after the withdrawal of Soviet investment since the early 1960s (collectivization), or irrational personal preferences that led to a national disaster (cultural revolution), or symbolic manipulation of an image of a people's war against possible invasions from the North (third-front construction). In short, due to China's unique structural position in the post-world war II international arena, the CCP didn't have much discretionary power to strategically choose a winning stance. Nixon's visit to China in 1972, can be seen as a strategic case of how China managed to survive the crisis by shifting its greatest enemy to being its greatest supporter. The 1979 war with Vietnam is a logical continuity of this strategic relationship, which gave China another 10 years of honeymoon with the West. Yet this short honeymoon suddenly ended right after the 4th of June 1989, and more recently, when the former Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1991. This structural change put China in a very difficult position: should China acknowledge the failure of the socialist experiment, or stick to the transformation from a planned economy to a socialist market economy that the CCP has made up its mind to pursue? Joining the WTO and becoming the center of world manufacturing gave China a respite over this sudden breakdown of a strategic, rewarding tripartite relationship between the USA, the Soviet Union, and China.

- 14 This event history depicts China as basically a survivor trying to mitigate the negative impacts of a disadvantaged structural position in the arena of international relations ever since the birth of the new China in 1949. Technology blockage in the national defense industry is yet another case that China has to deal with in order to survive. Now China has established a holistic national defense industry, to a certain extent thanks to this universal blockage, and even more to the altruistic sacrifice that people working in the Chinese national defense industry have consented to. Thus, I think that, in order to understand the modern fate of China as a highly developed modernity, a new rising world power with an altruistic heart (the Belt and Road scheme can be seen as a national initiative with this altruistic, or at least, win-win flavor), you have to take into consideration the survivalist nature, and the collective altruistic feelings and structural sacrifices that the Chinese people has paid to realize national revival.
- 15 Thus, though I partly agree with almost all the papers that this survivalist/self-salvationist modernity has left behind numerous social injustices/risks during the course of the national revival of the Chinese nation, I must point out that we somehow should deem these social injustices/risks the indispensable "structural sacrifices" that the unprecedented overthrow of a disadvantaged stereotype (such as the "Sick Man of East Asia") entailed. In short, the logic here is to categorize all the risks, social injustice, vulnerable individual fates, and "injuries" of all kinds, as structural sacrifices and collective social costs that the revival of a great civilization/nation such as China, entailed. Concepts such as survivalist/salvationist modernity, structural sacrifices, and collective social costs, have not only been ignored, left out in the scene, but will also necessarily be the target of criticism for its deep flavor of conservatism.

NOTES

1. The idea of naming Chinese modernity survivalist comes from a casual conversation with Prof. Kin Hong-Jung, a sociologist from Seoul National University and a close colleague of Prof. Chang Kyung-Sup who coined the term “compressed modernity”. Kim uses this concept of a survivalist modernity to describe the nature of the modern history of countries like Korea and China, who have suffered not only a plight of colonialization by Western super powers or neighboring military regimes, but also a constrained situation of trying their best to remain an independent political entity within the world geopolitical landscape. My own term regarded Chinese modernity as salvationist, in that it emphasizes not only the imminent risk of China’s being totally defeated or controlled by foreign powers since 1840 (with the 1919 Paris Peace Conference being another critical historical event that marked a real national crisis), but also the great altruism and sacrifice that Chinese people have invested in an uninterrupted endeavor to achieve national salvation and revival ever since.

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