

Colonial temporality and Chinese national modernization discourses

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This essay introduces the concept of *colonial temporality* to make sense of Chinese modernization discourses. Although institutional discourses on modernization and development in China are largely nationalist and tightly entangled with state authority, they nevertheless draw on conceptions of temporality that are colonial in character and origin. I will introduce three features of this temporality that make it colonial and highly ambivalent for the Chinese state: Firstly, it was created by colonial encounters in history in which it was used and co-produced by various groups that used it for various power projects. Secondly, it provides China with a »story« of future progress by placing it in the middle of history. And thirdly, it revolves around discourses of deficiency that compel Chinese institutional discourses to constantly compare China to the West. In consequence, the »quest« for a Chinese modernity also includes a search for narratives of a better future that can imagine improvement but are not based on colonial temporality. Paying more attention to this problem would permit scholars to better understand the positions of the Chinese state and of Chinese intellectuals within modernization discourses, and to better conceptualize the historic and transnational character of these discourses.

Making sense of colonial temporality

Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of works have analyzed social change in the contemporary People's Republic of China from a poststructuralist perspective, often related to subjectivation or governmentality (i.e., Sigley 1996). One of the key aspects of these works—and the aspect this article will focus on—is the rejection of »modernization,« and in some cases even »modernity,« as an analytical concept. Instead, these

works have understood modernization/modernity as a kind of ideology or belief system. To them, the assumption that China is not adequately modern has given birth to a discourse of modernity that helps normalize state social engineering projects (Rofel 1999, 13). For example, several authors have shown how this idea of »modernization« legitimizes and promotes various state interventions such as reeducating »backward« subjects (Yan 2003; Yi 2011), restructuring urban space (Zhang 2006), and constructing a modern population (Anagnost 2008; Greenhalgh 2003; Tomba 2004). Furthermore, they have shown that large parts of the population accept the idea that they have to modernize themselves, for example in fields of consumerism (Rofel 2007; Yan 2000) or labor markets (Hoffman 2010; Hsu 2005; Lin 2013). In short: Poststructuralist and governmentality-oriented research has shown impressively how »modernity« is not simply a structure analyzed by the social sciences, but an ideological discourse that helps in the governing of Chinese subjects.

However, most of these works share two problematic assumptions: Firstly, the idea that this modernization is processed and controlled by the Chinese party-state. Many poststructuralist authors write about the Chinese state as the entity that creates the project of modernization, especially by depicting the state as appropriating neoliberal discourses and practices in order to create a new regime of governance (e.g., Hoffman 2010; Ong 2007). Secondly, and partly as a consequence of the first point, a vast majority of these works assume that the project of modernization is to be understood as a reform-era phenomenon. They tend to portray the discourses of modernization as postsocialist (Rofel 1999; Smith 2012), late socialist (Zhang 2006) or neoliberal (Anagnost 2008; Rofel 2007; Yan 2003), and therefore as part of a radically new technology of governance in reform-era China.

By contrast, I will argue that contemporary discourses of modernization in the People's Republic of China are rooted in a certain conception of temporality which is based on a rather old and global notion of »colonial modernity« (Barlow 1997) and the related concern of creating a sovereign Chinese future. This *colonial temporality* makes sense of differences as different stages of progress framed by a linear notion of time. Accordingly,

economic and political changes are perceived as moving either forward or backward in time. In consequence, colonial temporality constructs a hierarchy of places that frames differences in politics, the economy, and sometimes even in culture in a temporal way, as either »advanced« (发达) or »backward« (落后), and therefore imagine the »time-lag of cultural differences« (Bhabha 2012, 340)—a »colonial time« (Wilk 1994) in which the periphery must catch up to a modernity that is already in existence elsewhere.¹ This colonial temporality is visible in a wide variety of concepts such as modernization, (societal) development, or progress, and of course it underlies the very notion of »modernity« itself.

As I will elaborate, colonial temporality has three important features: Firstly, it was and is produced in an entanglement of various Western, Japanese, and Chinese discourses. Secondly, it provides China with a »story« of future progress and self-improvement by placing it in the middle of a history which is still progressing. Thirdly, it revolves around discourses of deficiency that compel Chinese institutional discourses to constantly undertake comparisons with the West.

This does not mean that these discourses are destined to be hostile to Chinese traditions, or that they strive toward total Westernization. As a general idea of time, colonial temporality is not controlled by any single power group or ideology, and it is certainly not one-sidedly favorable or unfavorable to the Chinese government. It allows for shifting and contested positions toward traditions, ranging from projects that would entirely destroy the »old« to those that would preserve or even invent

1 The term »colonial temporality« was inspired by Wilk's term »colonial time.« The latter was, however, elaborated only with respect to media and commodity consumption. Here I will use it to describe the entirely different field of institutional discourses in China. As far as I am aware, the term »colonial temporality« is my own invention, translated from the German term »koloniale Zeitlichkeit.« Pinto (2013) talks about a »temporality of colonialism,« but means the different times and paces at which colonization and decolonization developed. However, the idea of an ideology of temporality as part of colonial discourse is widespread in postcolonial studies, as I will show below.

traditions as sources of modernization (Gransow 2006). Similarly, colonial temporality allows for visions of a Chinese alter-modernity that challenges Western domination. But because it is rooted in colonial temporality, China's modernization project—no matter what its specific content is—responds to problems that arise from perceiving China as backward and in need of catching up to other, more modern places.

I describe this conception on temporality as *colonial* for two reasons: Firstly, because it is a temporality created in the context of China's colonial history. Historians have described the ideology of modernity in China from the late Qing Era on, and they have shown its strong associations with experiences of colonialism (Duara 1995; Gransow 2006; Shih 2001). Secondly, because colonial temporality is rooted in a concept of linearly progressing time strikingly similar to that of colonial discourses. As various postcolonial authors have argued, colonial conceptions of temporality constitute a crucial dimension of domination that has become a key pillar of (post)colonial hegemony in various contexts (Chakrabarty 2000; Fabian 1983) and that constitutes a developmentalist governmentality not necessarily produced by or in favor of local governments (Escobar 1995). For China too, I will argue, colonial temporality allows Chinese institutional discourse to imagine a historical agency of »China« only at the price of placing China in a position of being backward and inferior to the West. There can be no doubt that Chinese institutional discourses understand modernization clearly as a project of *national modernization* that will create a distinctively *Chinese* modernity in which China is supposed to achieve national wealth and strength (Gransow 2006, 163). By no means is it understood as imitating the West. On the contrary, it often implies becoming strong enough to defend itself against Western and Japanese imperial aggression if necessary (Wang 2012). However, institutional discourses have not yet found a way to articulate a discourse that allows one to imagine development into a Chinese, self-determined modernity, without portraying this development as a form of surpassing or catching up to the already modern West.

In order to place colonial temporality in its context of power relations, I will draw on Anibal Quijano's work on *coloniality* (Quijano 2000; Quijano

2013). Quijano argues that power asymmetries in the world cannot be reduced to relations of economic exploitation. Instead, as Mignolo argues in his discussion of Quijano's work, four dimensions of coloniality must be analyzed in their specific entanglement: the economy, authority, knowledge/subjectivity and race/class/gender (Mignolo 2011, 8). As I will show, the third dimension of this colonial matrix, the *coloniality of knowledge and subjectivity*, is of special importance when dealing with China's modernization project. This is especially true of the »new temporal perspective« (Quijano 2000, 541) of colonial knowledge that locates the colonized in the past of Western colonizers. I will focus on colonial temporality as a coloniality of knowledge and its relationship to the dimension of authority. Its relation to the economy and to categories of race/class/gender will have to be discussed in later works. Of course, the four dimensions cannot be separated. But the complex issue of economic power is too easily reduced to a simplified idea of adaptation to the rules of the Western economy, and the multi-layered Chinese discourses on ethnicity are similarly often narrowed down to stereotypical depictions of the Han discriminating non-Han minorities. I believe it is better to leave these issues aside for now rather than to run the risk of portraying them in such an overly simplified manner.

Of course, colonial temporality in China is not a new empirical discovery. Sinologists have known about the ideology of »backwardness« and »modernization« for a long time (e.g., Duara 1995; Lin and Galikowski 1999), and postcolonial scholars have long elaborated the idea that coloniality implies a discourse on linear time used to legitimize the subjection of cultures deemed »backward« (Chakrabarty 1992; Fabian 1983; Wilk 1994). What I attempt to do in this article is therefore simply to use these classical theoretical ideas in postcolonial studies in order to provide a better and more abstract conceptualization of the existing sinological knowledge—a conceptualization that will hopefully help poststructuralist authors to better account for the legacies of colonialism in their analysis of modernization projects in China.

Entangled production of colonial temporality

The first feature of colonial temporality is its entangled production. The term »entangled« is inspired by Conrad and Randeria (2002). It indicates that colonial temporality is not simply a discourse attached to one specific power project, e.g., British colonial power, but rather that this discourse takes place in »cooperation« between different, sometimes contradicting power structures. For example, liberal discourses on development and democracy as well as discourses on socialism with Chinese characteristics often appear to be opposing powers, but at the same time they do cooperate in their story of China's still-ongoing development. They cooperate in reproducing colonial temporality because it can support the arguments of all kinds of political discourses.² This is also the reason why colonial temporality could survive until today: if it had merely been a discourse of colonizers, or if it had been strictly tied to one specific center of power, it would certainly not have been able to survive the various deep changes in political authority over China during the last century.

Colonial temporality originated in the context of colonial occupation and in an asymmetric exchange between Western, Japanese, and Chinese discourses, without being strictly tied to a single colonial authority. In fact, colonial rule in China was so fragmented that some have suggested that one should speak of colonialisms in the plural (Goodman and Goodman 2012). The various colonial powers held only incomplete authority over China and they were constantly fighting each other. However, the colonial powers were able to create a relatively coherent colonial discourse because they recognized each other as different from the colonized, and because they exchanged ideas based on shared notions of civilization and modernization. Furthermore, Chinese intellectuals actively interacted with and appropriated these discourses within their

2 In fact, I already overly simplify the global and entangled character of these discourses here by focusing mainly on »Western« and »Chinese« discourses and largely leaving aside the very important Japanese and Soviet discourses and translations as well as these countries' imperialist projects.

own agendas, and further helped to reproduce colonial temporality as a dominant concept of time and history. Therefore, the idea of colonial temporality could spread and become effective relatively independently from colonial authority, and could constitute a relative coherent system of knowledge despite the fragmented nature of colonial rule.

During the time of semi-colonialism in China, colonial temporality was in many respects produced by Chinese intellectuals themselves. This does not mean that colonial rule and colonial violence were not crucial for this process. Lili Zhu's contribution in this issue indicates that images of (technological) modernization became plausible in China due to experiences of defeat in war, but that this defeat did not immediately lead to the internalization of colonial temporality (Zhu 2017). As Zhu indicates, colonial temporality was a specific form of making sense of this defeat in terms of civilizational progress or backwardness that emerged in the early twentieth century after several defeats of China by various colonial powers. However, when colonial temporality emerged, it was no longer simply the technological imagination Zhu writes about, and neither was it simply a Chinese experience: it had become a new discourse on civilization, produced in exchanges between Western and Chinese knowledge, mediated mainly through Japanese translations. This new discourse was embraced by all sides because it helped the colonial powers disguise their superior ability to use violence as a higher level of modernity, and because Chinese elites understood it as a theory helping them to reach the level of modernity necessary to fend off this violence. Because of this, various Chinese groups with different political agendas for liberating China appropriated the very same discourse on temporality used by colonizers to legitimize their rule. Chinese intellectuals and political activists started to study European Enlightenment literature and Western history to gain an understanding of modernity. In doing so, they swiftly picked up orientalist discourses originally designed to naturalize colonial power and appropriated them for their own discourses on strengthening and modernizing China. Most obviously, the intellectuals of the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement relied very explicitly on ideas of colonial temporality and Chinese backwardness

in their discourses (Lin 1979; Shih 2001). The existence of multiple and fragmented colonialisms in China did not weaken the coherence of such a coloniality of power. On the contrary, it created a situation in which it became difficult for Chinese intellectuals to envision an imperialist »enemy« they could struggle against (Shih 2001, 373).

Through its appropriation into Chinese intellectual discourses, colonial temporality was not only separated from its context of colonial authority, but also re-embedded in a new project of state authority in the process of nation-building. During the late nineteenth century, discourses on colonial temporality were still by and large discourses on ways of strengthening the Qing Empire. But roughly since the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial temporality became an essential part of Chinese nationalist movements that was directed against the Qing dynasty and that demanded that China become a nation-state (Lin 1979; Wang 2014). In the context of nationalist movements, colonial temporality was used by various kinds of political groups, and the topic of becoming a nation and the progressing temporality of the nation became deeply entangled (Duara 1995). This is true of socialist anti-imperialist movements, too. For example, Chinese socialist discourses at the time were clearly rooted in the idea of a (socialist) modernization of China and the third world. Visions of revolutionary modernization were nurtured not only by European ideas but also by engaging with decolonizing movements from all over the world (Karl 2002). Thus, it is not surprising to find that the construction of temporality as »modernization« appeared together with discourses that motivated and legitimized the centralization of authority into one nation-state.

The fact that colonial temporality could be separated from colonial authority and become part of Chinese nationalism and anti-imperialism is an important reason for its continuity throughout the process of decolonization. There can be little doubt that a form of de-colonization had taken place by 1945 with respect to colonial authority and by 1949 with respect to the economy. But even though 1949 constituted decolonization in many respects, the pervasive and persuasive power of colonial temporality did not disappear under Mao. On the contrary:

thanks to its entanglement with nationalism and decolonization, colonial temporality after 1949 could more than ever before create a coherent effect. The Chinese state that was striving to become a modern and centralized »nation-state« would take on the project of modernization and articulate it as a coherent theoretical and political agenda. Thus, similar and often much better-organized forms of modernism were visible after 1949, too. For example, Yang (2011) and Duara (1991) describe extreme and sometimes brutal regimes of self-modernization during and after the Mao era, tracing their origins back to Chinese attempts to deal with colonial experiences. This is not to say that Yang is right in portraying Maoism as entirely anti-traditional. But under Mao, the desire to modernize China, and to achieve self-determination based on this modernization, finally connected with a fully coherent state discourse and state authority that could enforce it on all of China. After colonial temporality had informed discourses of becoming a nation, it was backed up by the institutional power of an accomplished state authority from 1949 on.

This new, coherent, and state-led version of the Chinese modernization discourse continued to play a role, although within a different overall framework, in discourses after 1978. The cooperating partners may have changed, and the imaginary »center« of modernity may have been renegotiated. But the cooperation and mutual appropriation of discourses between Western development discourses and Chinese discourses of national modernization remained obvious. In fact, this change was not very big: although Chinese and Western institutional discourses had perceived each other as the socialist/capitalist »other« for a certain time, they had never ceased to agree that China was in need of modernization—yet the aims and means of this modernization differed between socialist and capitalist modernity. For example, contemporary Anglo-American literature on development is obviously reproducing colonial temporality when it talks about stages of development (understood as GDP levels or even a »human development index«) and about isolable nation-states as the units of analysis. In this respect, Daniel Vukovich has pointed to the rise of a discourse of »becoming the sameness« (Vukovich 2012): while

old colonial and Cold War discourses stressed China's »otherness,« newer ones point to the »sameness« to the West that China *will achieve in the future*. In doing so, they ironically reproduce the same colonial temporality used by the Chinese state they seek to oppose.

This does not mean that the project of modernization never transformed or was never contested. It transformed constantly and was contested between varieties of different political positions. Throughout the entire twentieth century, it oscillated between modernization through »revolution,« notions of step-by-step »modernization,« and a technocratic notion of »development.« Even though the latter position seems to have become dominant in the political sphere from the 1990s on, this decade also saw an explosion of pluralistic and theoretically innovative schools of thought beyond the state (Lin and Galikowski 1999; Wang 1998; Zhang 2001). But after all, throughout all these transformations, and through all the different innovative ideas about what modernity might be, the basic idea of temporality remained the same. It was reproduced by the different power groups within the Chinese state and by independent intellectuals, and not only within China, but also by Western social scientists, including many China-specialists, before, during, and after the Cold War. At times it had such hegemonic power that both institutional discourses and intellectual counter-discourses adhered to it, as Chan Xiaomei's call for anti-official Occidentalism shows, for example (Chen 1995). In this sense, even though China's future was constantly contested, its vision remained rooted in a temporality that originated from colonial entanglements.

In the middle of history

The second feature of colonial temporality is that it places China in the middle of an ongoing history. Of course, again, different authors reproducing colonial temporality may imagine an entirely different outcome of this history: becoming like the USA, establishing global communism, creating a self-determined future for each country, and so on. Nevertheless, and disregarding the imagined destination of the journey, they largely agree on the fact that China is still on the journey—not at the end, but in the middle of a course toward improving society. In saying that China is

»in the middle« of history, I am not referring to Fukuyama's (1992) liberal modernization theory, but rather to Vattimo's (1987) postmodern »End of (Hi)Story.« Vattimo's argument that intellectuals have lost their belief in a course of history and a continuous improvement and perfectibility of society is certainly not true for China, not even for the majority of Chinese postmodern authors. But this idea of being »in the middle« is not tied to the idea of »Westernization« or the spread of liberal democracy. On the contrary, almost all reformers in China have, albeit to varying degrees, insisted on preserving some Chinese characteristics, and the official Chinese version of this discourse does not refer to liberalism but rather to socialism. Being »in the middle« simply means that there is a linearly improving development of history in which China is imagined to be in the very middle.

Chinese institutional discourses can therefore use colonial temporality to imagine and mobilize agency: they place China in the middle of a progressing history with an end that is not yet set in stone. This idea allows one to reconnect colonial temporality with a new project of authority of the Chinese state, because it makes possible what Simon calls »acting upon a story that we can believe« (Simon 2017): it allows one to articulate visions of and hopes for a Chinese future by telling a »story« about improving all of society, not just about economic indicators. It is a story that creates a desire as well as the imagined destiny to improve through advancement. This story is certainly empowering state authority at least at a symbolic level: it can justify painful reforms as well as the re-education of backward behavior. It can create a mandate for direct interventions into all kinds of areas in order to modernize them. For those anxious or dissatisfied about the current society, it creates a hope for a better future (Latham 2002). At the same time, it corresponds with promoting a self-enhancing and self-improving subject that lies at the center of many newer technologies of subjectivity (Yan 2003; Yi 2011). It relates individuals' search for improvement with national belonging, as the modernization of the nation is both a precondition and a result of a better life for every subject of its population. It can therefore, as a story, call for reforms and at the same time defend China against criticism,

because the position in the »middle of history« allows both, the imagining of a different path yet to be taken and pride with respect to the steps already achieved.

Furthermore, this story is able to integrate a wide range of ideas and specialized discourses. Seemingly »capitalist« developmental discourses on improving economic growth rates or increasing foreign investment are mixed with aims of »building socialism« (建设社会主义) and with nationalist and culturalist speeches on a Chinese »great rejuvenation« (伟大复兴) or Confucian civilization (儒家文明). These diverse ideas can be brought together by a colonial temporality that allows them to become united in a discourse on a Chinese modernity: socialist modernization and developmentalism can be united under the common aim of modernization, and socialist modernity and ideas on Confucianist culture can both be read as part of the quest for a distinctively Chinese modernity.³ Rather than being an assemblage of seemingly contradictory neoliberalism and non-liberalism (Ong 2007), they in fact constitute a relatively coherent system of modernist ideas. By doing so, Chinese institutional discourses express not only a concern with industrialization or economic growth, but also with civilization and human development—and they connect all of these concerns through a common underlying idea of temporality.

Therefore, the story about being in the middle of history fundamentally challenges »Western« hegemony in development discourses. However, discourses on the end and on the middle of history both envision one point in a linear history that can have an end and a middle, and therefore they »cooperate« in reproducing colonial temporality. Due to this cooperation, colonial temporality cannot possibly be understood as a Chinese state project (or, even less true, an anti-Western project). But neither can it be seen as a domination of the West, as some post-

3 See, as an detailed example, Yan Junchen's (2017) article in this issue on the »cooperation« of American and Chinese political scientists in constructing and essentializing the group of »waiqi white collar professionals,« even though different scholars adhere to different political ideologies.

development discourses seem to imply (Escobar 1995): Chinese discourses are certainly encouraged and inspired by Western ideas of development, but frame these ideas within an entirely different historic-national narrative: a history with an outcome yet to be negotiated, rather than a world culture that is already institutionalized—a Chinese modernity yet to come.

Discourses of deficiency and constant comparisons with the West

The third important feature of colonial temporality is that it revolves around discourses of deficiency that compel Chinese discourses to constantly compare their own country with a hyperreal West that serves as the reference for modernity. The story of being in the middle of history still transports ideas from colonial discourse, most visibly in the fact that it revolves around *discourses of deficiency*. The »story« that colonial temporality can produce places its historic subjects in a position where they lack something that more modern people already possess. Discourses on how to transform Chinese subjects thus start with the self-evident idea that Chinese subjects are somehow in deep deficit, that they are underdeveloped subjects requiring further development guided by the state and/or social scientists.

A good example of this is the reform-era debate on »Suzhi« (素质), a term awkwardly translated as »human quality« in the scholarly debate. Debates on the assumed low Suzhi of Chinese people have been part of modernization discourses at least since the 1989 New Enlightenment movement, and the term continues to appear in debates on how to modernize or develop the country. Suzhi is frequently evoked in debates on population quality (Anagnost 2004) or educational programs both for students (Kipnis 2011) and workers (Yan 2003). Several (Western) authors claim to have identified a neoliberal Suzhi discourse used by state institutions to create neoliberal subjects in China (Woronov 2009; Yan 2003). However, as Kipnis (2007) and Yi (2011) have argued, there is no consistent »neoliberal« use of the word Suzhi. The authors in question have failed to demonstrate how Suzhi could be considered a neoliberal *concept*; rather, what they actually could show was the ways in which neoliberal policy makers use the *word* Suzhi within their discourse. Rather

than being tied to neoliberalism, the definition of Suzhi depends on the political position of those using the word. In neoliberal discourses Suzhi may be defined as entrepreneurial spirit, while it may denote morality or civility in conservative or Marxist discourse, and in the sense commonly used by the public, it often refers to morals and honesty.

There is, however, one idea shared by most references to the term Suzhi in institutional discourses, regardless whether they are neoliberal or not: it is the idea that »Suzhi«—whatever it may mean—should be increased. Together with other words such as civilization (文明), reasonability (合理性), and all-around development of people (人的全面发展), Suzhi is used as an element within discourses on the *deficiency of Chinese subjects*. What constitutes Suzhi as an element of these discourses is not an inherent meaning of this word, but its position within argumentative structures that deploy the term to describe people whose Suzhi has to be improved. In consequence, the idea of a lack of Suzhi contributes to an overall discourse of deficiency that attributes a *subjectivity in need of development* to Chinese people. For this reason, various policy makers can use the idea of lacking Suzhi to push for the development they want: more entrepreneurial spirit, more piety toward one's parents, more moral compassion, and so on. Whatever political reforms or ideal subjects they desire, they can define having Suzhi accordingly, and use the discourses of deficiency in order to urge the promotion of these abilities.

Such discourses of deficiency are, again, deeply rooted in colonial temporality, specifically the orientalist notion that Chinese people are *not sufficiently modern* and therefore *need to be developed*. Such ideas were a fundamental part of colonial discourses almost from their beginning: they have been used by colonial powers in order to construct China as despotic and inferior and to legitimize its forceful opening (Jones 2001, especially 67–98), and they have been used by Chinese reformers to push for reform. Their effect for domination lay and still lies in the fact that they can bind together various topics and relate them to a common problem of overcoming backwardness: consumer practices, public behavior, family life, creativity, education, work ethic, and many other matters can all be found to be either modern or backward. When seen through the lens of

discourses of deficiency, all of these matters and practices belong to a bundle of things that must be improved to achieve the goal of becoming a modern society. Once the interconnections are created, it becomes the whole »bundle« of things that needs to be governed—because all the things related under the problem of colonial temporality are potentially lacking and in need of improvement, and because their improvement matters for the future of the nation. Suddenly, and thanks to the idea that something is lacking, virtually anything can be subsumed under the category of things that must be governed in order to improve China and the Chinese people.

However, within the framework of these discourses of deficiency, modernity is defined by reference to an already existing modernity elsewhere, beyond the experienced reality of those talking about it. In Chinese institutional discourses, China's modernity is described through *constant comparisons with the West* that constitute a binary worldview of China/West and at the same time (or rather because of this) allow the West to be the place where »the clock is set« (Wilk 1994, 103). The West of these discourses is, of course, a hyperreal West that serves as an imaginary reference point for talking about modernity, just as Chakrabarty (2000) described for Indian discourses. Various authors constantly compare China with the West in terms of how far away China is from this modern metropolitan West, or how long it will take to surpass the West. Becoming modern therefore means first and foremost catching up to and subsequently overcoming the former colonizing powers. This does not imply a definite opinion toward the West—one can find all kinds of opinions, from glorification of the West to its condemnation, to more nuanced opinions or even views that differentiate between individual European and American countries. But even those works that actually reject the West/USA as evil depict it as a superior modern evil, as the development stage that must first be reached in order to overcome it in the future.

Most importantly, by debating modernity through comparisons with the West, Chinese authors have come to reproduce the colonial style of universalism. In the post-Mao era institutional discourses perform, once again, what Shih Shumei has called a »particularization of Chinese culture

and universalization of Western culture« (Shih 2001, 131). Even in the Mao era, the Western regime was depicted as the standard model of capitalism, but at that time, it was countered by a counter-universalism of Maoist socialism. In today's China, however, the West seems to have achieved the status of the only universalized model. This is visible, for example, in development debates, which may describe China as becoming like the West or may explain why China is not becoming like the West, or at which development level China is in comparison to Western countries. In such discourses, pro- and anti-Western authors as well as Chinese and Western scholars all use a language of locality to describe China. That is, they are marking events in China as »Chinese« and attributing singularity to them when comparing them to the West. The West, in turn, is frequently portrayed as the only »other,« as if modernities outside of China(local)/West(global) did not exist, and in many cases it is not even described as a place: »developed countries« or »global standards« might serve as placeholders for US/European countries. In effect, events in Chinese history are portrayed as specific, while events in Western history constitute the universal framework against which the Chinese events are compared—and, due to the discourses of deficiency, they are often compared in terms of what China lacks.

All in all, the discourses of deficiency and the external references they use create an idea of Chinese inferiority. Chinese discourses on modernity are compelled to constantly observe »the West« and compare their own country to it, and they are compelled to do so by the colonial temporality they themselves construct in order to imagine historical agency. In consequence, statements on »modernity« and »global standards« as well as practices of »modern governance« become more credible when they are articulated from within Western institutional settings—including such statements that depict Chinese institutions as inferior. Because of the constant comparisons to the West they invoke, discourses of deficiency show an ambivalent position for the Chinese state. All they do is create a drive for »change« that can be used by all kinds of policy makers, and for all kinds of political ends, including those hostile to the Chinese government. Indeed, opponents of the state have systematically used discourses

of deficiency in order to articulate their critique of the state, or in order to construct a Western utopia they want China to emulate (Chen 1995). The very same colonial temporality that legitimizes the state's modernization projects, and the same discourses of deficiency that encourage reeducating the population, simultaneously nurture resistances and counter-discourses—because all they basically say is that China is not sufficient as it is, but has to advance on a linear temporal path. At the end of this path, however, one can place the Western »end of history« or the »Chinese modernity yet to come« or any other idea, depending on one's political position. The irony of the Chinese national modernization discourse is that in its current framework, it produces visions of modernity only through external references—the »story« of modernization is at the same time the pitfall of coloniality that grants historic agency only to those who are content with »catching up.«

Searching for alternatives

By this point, it should have become clear that colonial temporality is neither solely invented nor entirely controlled by the contemporary Chinese state. It is just as much a historical legacy of colonialism as it is a narrative invented by the state. It is used just as much in Western neo-institutionalist discourses of »becoming the sameness« as it is by Chinese state institutions to legitimize their policies. And it is just as much subjecting China to external references for modernity as it is providing a story of national modernization. This insight makes certain, frequently described nationalist struggles within Chinese intellectual discourses easier to grasp: at least some of the »nationalist« outcries in China seem to be attempts to struggle against colonial temporality rather than claims of Chinese superiority. This is especially true of many works that attempt to uncover a national culture or Chineseness.

This might be exemplified best by looking at the Chinese postcolonial discourses that are institutionalized, but not part of the political sphere in the narrow sense. These discourses took (and are taking) place in an era of ideological reorientation. The 1980s had brought a disenchantment with both the Maoist discourse and, after the Tiananmen incident, of the

radical liberalist discourse (Wang 1998). This gave way to a multi-layered debate during the 1990s, often revolving around the search for new paradigms and new theoretical languages. Aside from (and sometimes within) the widely recognized struggle between the »new left« and »(neo)liberals« (Kipnis 2003), various debates on Chinese identity and Chinese self-determination emerged. These debates were nationalist and culturalist in character, but they clearly described their search for Chineseness' as attempts to articulate a specifically Chinese vision of the future, and often as quests to overcome the dilemma of coloniality.

This is most obvious in works demanding a new discourse to describe social change and future in China. For example, during the 1990s, Cao Shunqing and Li Siqu (Cao and Li 1996) diagnosed Chinese cultural theory as suffering from a state of »aphasia« (失语症状). According to Cao and Li, Chinese theory had become »unable to express anything outside of the language and concepts of Western discourses« (除却洋腔非话语, 离开洋调不能言). If Chinese theory were ever to play a role in the world, they concluded, it would have to develop its own theory formulated in the language of its people. Diagnosing a similar problem, Zhang Yiwu engaged in 1993 in constructing a new, hybrid language that was intended to reconnect Chinese intellectuals with classical modes of expression that were merged with new words and concepts derived from many other languages (Chan 2004, 36–38; Zhang 1993).

For many Chinese postcolonial scholars, this attempt to decolonize discourse included a new way of imagining time and development and overcoming most of the basic structures of colonial temporality. For example, Zhang Yiwu, together with Zhang Fa and Wang Yichuan, argues that the discourse of »modernity« (现代性) should be replaced with a discourse of »Chineseness« (中华性) (Zhang Fa et al. 1994). They root this idea of Chineseness in a critique of the discourse of modernity that had been promoted mainly by Zhang Yiwu.⁴ For Zhang, the discourse of modernity has compelled Chinese intellectuals to reflect

4 Zhang Yiwu also sometimes talks about a knowledge of modernity (»现代性的«知识»; Zhang 1994, 105).

upon themselves entirely in categories of thought imported from Western colonial discourse and which place China in a time and place that is backward and distant from their own reference points for modernity (Zhang 1994).

Zhang et. al. (1994) introduced »Chineseness« as an alternative to this discourse of modernity. This new »discourse framework« (话语框架) was supposed to help people negotiate China's development instead of following a predestined path of »catching up.« Chineseness would still uphold the notion of development (发展) in the sense of an improvement and of people striving for the „highest degree of humanity« (人类性的最高度). But other than modernity, which is rooted in a linear narrative with an already predetermined direction of development, Chineseness would understand development as a contested process with endless possibilities and many possible models and paths. Consequentially, this »Chineseness« was—in contrast to what the name seems to suggest—not understood as rediscovering an essence of otherness in contrast/conflict with the West, but as a hybrid and fluid concept. Zhang et.al. insisted that Chineseness could not be realized by rejecting the West or by opposing it with reference to Chinese tradition. Rather, »Chineseness« would not deal with differences such as Chinese/Western, new/old, or socialist/capitalist, but would simply »take what is beneficial« (有利的就拿来) from these various cultural systems.

There can be little doubt that such works produce a discourse of cultural exceptionalism. Chatterjee (1993) and Duara (1995) argued that such references to one's own culture are typical for third world nationalism, and subsequently criticized such discourses for their nationalist-culturalist assumptions. Chinese postcolonial authors seem to be just another case of discourses on national culture: they portray China in search of its Chineseness and in need of a specific Chinese »language« for itself. Also, the choice of words such as »Chineseness« reminds one of a conservative culturalism that grieves over the decline of the original language of a culture, defending it against »Westernization« or »Americanization.« Therefore, Sheng Anfeng (2007) has rightfully argued that the works of Cao and Zhang have appropriated the theories of postmodernism and

postcolonialism within a nationalist discourse. Similar claims are made by Zhang Longxi about Chinese postcolonial discourses in general (Zhang 1999) and, more polemically, by Chen Xiaomei (Chen 1995): due to the specific situation within China, both authors argue, the rejection of Western theory in Chinese postcolonial discourses would contribute to existing power structures rather than helping to reflect or criticize them.

However, authors such as Cao Shunqin and Zhang Fa, discussed above, make perfectly clear that they understand this nationalism as a remedy to the »aphasia« created by discourses that do not allow one to articulate »Chinese« problems in a »Chinese« discourse framework. Seen in the light of my argumentation above, this seems to rise up against the discourse of colonial temporality that enables historical agency at the price of subjection to coloniality. This is especially evident in the attempts of Zhang Fa to reject modernity without rejecting development. »Chineseness« attempts to embrace the concept of development and improvement in the course of history, but tries to reject the idea that this development must happen according to the trajectory described in Western theories. Zhang et al. try to shift attention from »catching up« with a modernity that is defined by external references to a discourse of improving current society without a model or a known direction. In doing so, they try to open up a space of possibilities and »decision« instead of a linear path of modernization, while trying to maintain the »story« of improvement and the agency it creates. They thus articulate not only a plausible alternative to modernization discourses, but also to Western postmodern discourses that entirely give up any notion of improvement.

Undertaking the enterprise of constructing a new language within the framework of cultural nationalism is perfectly understandable. Although colonial temporality is constructed within Chinese discourses, Cao und Zhang are not entirely wrong when they describe it as non-Chinese. It is, indeed, constructed in a transnationally entangled discourse, and it does, indeed, favor the former colonizers. Calling this »Western« and putting it in opposition to »Chinese« might be a simplification. But what other choice does one have when suffering from »aphasia«? If Chinese institutional discourses largely work within a framework of colonial

temporality, and if the concepts they provide cannot escape from this framework, then these intellectuals must face the problem of writing about, as well as in, a language that does not yet exist. They seek to describe a discourse framework outside of colonial temporality which they argue should be created—but because it has not been fully invented yet, they must do so within the »old,« still colonial framework of language they seek to overcome. And it seems rather obvious from the content of such writings that they are trying to solve the problem by »appropriating« existing ideas: the ideas of nationhood and national cultural authenticity, which are both parts of the dominant framework of modernization and which are both recognized as arguments in Chinese institutional discourses as well as internationally. In short, those who believe they lack a »language« attempt to use the language of Chinese culture to construct different visions of temporality.

In this sense, we are facing two forms of nationalism, although they are inseparable in reality. On the one hand, there is a nationalism within colonial temporality that understands the nation both as telos and as a subject of history and that requires China to become a nation in order to achieve a self-determined modernity. On the other hand, there is a »nationalism« of Chineseness that is articulated in search for alternatives to colonial temporality. It focuses less on the linear progress through history than on the question what kind of modernity »China« seeks to achieve—it is not even entirely clear whether this should indeed be labeled as »nationalism,« because Chineseness is not confined to the boundaries of the People's Republic of China.

This, I believe, clearly exemplifies the pervasiveness of colonial temporality, or rather: its power to find its way even into discourses that try to challenge it. Zhang Fa, Zhang Yiwu, and similar authors indeed articulate a feasible alternative vision of improving China, a vision that does not require the ideology of modernity. But they articulate it in the language of locality, as a Chinese exceptionality, that gains its uniqueness mainly in comparison with a hyperreal »West.« To Zhang Fa et al. (1994), Chineseness is not lacking anything. But it is still local and specific, in contrast to the universal notion of »modernity« to which it is supposed

to constitute an alternative. Here, too, Western modernity as a generalized reference is put in contrast to something that is portrayed as local and specifically »Chinese,« effectively constructing a binary worldview of China/the West, even if the two poles are not understood as incommensurable.⁵ The multiplicities of cultures neither Chinese nor Western are pushed aside to the margin of attention, and the story of »Chineseness« does not attempt to speak to these cultures. It is, after all, questionable whether such theories could ever allow China's discourse to be heard in the world, as Cao Shunqin, for example, envisioned. In fact, their own argumentative structure effectively prevents these theories from applying to other countries—after all, their arguments are bound to a specific Chinese identity.

Conclusion

The concern of institutional discourses in China is *national modernization* because China is supposed to modernize in order to *achieve national strength*, and China is supposed to *be(come) a nation* in order to modernize. In this article I have argued that the concept of temporality underlying this national modernization is, however, a product of a history of colonialism that continues to be structured by a coloniality of knowledge and subjectivity. The discourses on national modernization and the search for alternative languages of development are not just part of a technology of subjectivation created by the state, but a problem the technologies of the state are trying to solve. This problem, however, was not invented by the contemporary Chinese state; it is a transnational discourse as well as a legacy of colonial history.

Inspired by Anibal Quijano (2000), I have argued that the relationships between authority and colonial temporality as a form of knowledge are

5 The same could be said about neo-Confucian authors such as Jiang Qing, who also construct a narrative based on a perceived Chinese tradition. However, in contrast to Zhang Yiwu, these neo-Confucian authors insist on an essentializing notion of Chinese culture, therefore fitting much better into the framework of the theory of »self-orientalization« set out by Arif Dirlik.

complex: colonial temporality emerged as coloniality of knowledge in the context of colonialism and became appropriated by Chinese intellectuals who, at the same time, internalized the colonial temporality and re-embedded it outside of its context of colonial authority in a new context of nationalism. Because of this, colonial temporality strengthened the emerging nationalism and was subsequently institutionalized by the state authority after the establishment of a Chinese nation state.

Despite this close relationship between colonial temporality and Chinese state authority, critical scholars are misled when attributing »modernization« and its effects to the »Chinese state« alone. Colonial temporality was and is produced in an entanglement of various discourses in the West (Anglo-America), Japan, and China. The fact that China has long since attained considerable political and economic power is no valid argument for ignoring the pervasiveness of colonial temporality because it is not a problem of neocolonial interventions in China's sovereignty, but a problem of *coloniality of knowledge and subjectivity* that is connected to, but not entirely determined by, economic and political power: it creates its power effects through its hegemony in the domain of »time« and therefore of the horizon of expectable futures, and because it can attribute a certain subjectivity—a subjectivity in need of development—based on this knowledge about time.

However, traditional post-development critique would be equally misleading if it assumed that colonial temporality entirely subjects China to a Western hegemony that forces it to assimilate to »global standards.« Rather, colonial temporality has a double effect of subjection and empowerment. It *subjects* institutional discourses to a clock set by the Western metropolis, but at the same time *empowers* them to conquer their own history and their own future. It allows the imagining of a self-determined Chinese historical agency, and therefore holds the potential to create the possibility of »acting upon a story that we can believe« (Simon 2017). Moreover, it can bind together nationalism, modernization, economic growth, socialism, and Confucian traditions—concepts that are often misunderstood as contradictory by Western authors—because

they become part of a larger project encompassing them all: the project of national modernization.

But as long as its story is told in the language of colonial temporality, it continues to portray China as lacking modern qualities. In fact, its hopeful story of progress can only be told as long as China constructs itself as not yet fully modern and grants »full modernity« to other countries. The Chinese discourse on national modernization holds ambivalence for the Chinese state because it is rooted in colonial temporality: it envisions national self-determination, but it is also a legacy of colonialism. It empowers the state, but is also a resource of anti-government criticism. It creates a national narrative and also strengthens the notion of an inferior Chineseness. In short, focusing solely on its function for naturalizing state power means misunderstanding the historic and transnational character of modernization discourses that stem from its drawing on colonial temporality. Hence we should not hastily discard as state propaganda the recent struggles to find a history beyond colonial temporality, one that takes away the notion of »lack« and at the same time leaves hope for a better future. Rather, we should take it seriously and analyze it as ways of dealing with a colonial temporality, a story of »backwardness« that is part of the difficult legacy of coloniality in China.

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