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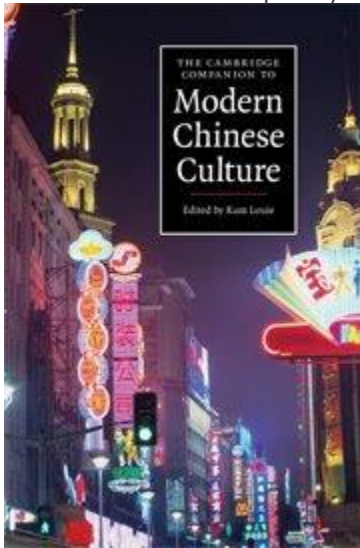
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# In Case You Missed It: Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture

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By Miri Kim

For scholars of China who are interested in modernity, the looming question seems to be, is 'modernity' a valid and useful analytical category for describing, explaining, and understanding China? And if so, how should modernity and its attendant conceptual apparatuses be deployed in investigations of China's various aspects, historical, political, cultural, and so on? In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, editor Kam Louie and a distinguished list of contributors seek to explore China within its particular modern contexts and clarify the idea of 'modernity' by using historical and contemporary cases.



In his introduction Louie writes, "At first glance, the concept of 'modern' should not present many problems since it should really be a matter of definition only," with the standard definition locating the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution as the benchmark by which to recognize the advent of the modern era (3). Louie rejects this definition as being unrepresentative of changes in Chinese culture; he likewise rejects the rigid schema used to organize Chinese history using the terms *jindai* (mid-nineteenth-century to the 1919 May Fourth Movement), *xiandai* (1919 to 1949), and *dangdai* (the post-1949, i.e. contemporary, period) (3-4).

Instead, Louie proposes 1900 as the beginning of modern Chinese culture, due to the changes heralded as well as influenced by the intense output of works on modernization from famous writers like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei around that time (5). As this starting point implies, the influence of late Qing culture on China's emerging modern cultures is taken seriously by the authors featured in this volume. And as Louie points out, this periodicization centers the discussion of modern Chinese culture firmly in the twentieth-century and beyond, into a "new millennium [that] has already witnessed a Chinese culture that was unimaginable only a few generations ago" (6-7).

The matter of how to define 'China' and Chineseness, while perhaps not quite as harrowing as plunging into the vast literature on modernity, also merits mention in the introduction and is addressed in several chapters. As the twentieth century is such a big focus of this volume, Chinese diasporas and overseas communities and the ways in which they have shaped and are shaping modern Chinese culture also constitutes an important part of the story. For example, the benefits and significance of an outsider connection can be clearly seen in the phenomenon of the so-called *haigui*, relatively young, foreign-educated, energetic professionals who are returning to live and work in China in increasing numbers. Wang Gungwu's chapter, "Flag, flame and embers: diaspora cultures" highlights the connections between overseas Chinese communities within their host countries as well as with mainland China, as well as offering an interesting comparative look at different diasporic

communities and how their specific histories affect their relationship to Chinese culture (123-124). Wang divides diasporic communities into three types, "the faithful," composed of those who contend that non-mainland Chinese culture is the only authentic one, "the peripheral," who "strive for a modified authenticity that could win recognition not so much from their fellow nationals as from the Chinese of China," and "the marginal," who have absorbed elements of host cultures to the greatest extent (129-130). Wang suggests that "the quality of the modern culture that China projects to the outside world" (132) will be a key element in the ways these communities define and negotiate their identities and national-cultural relationships with China, host countries, and other diasporic communities.

In another chapter dealing with changing configurations of Chinese culture, Sor-Hoon Tan examines the phenomenon of the *Xin Rujia* (translated as "Contemporary Neo-Confucians" or "New Confucians"), a diverse group of writers and thinkers who advocate a culturalist strategy for situating and understanding China in the world, particularly vis-à-vis modernization and the West (129-130). Rather than a single unified movement calling for the return of "traditional" values or rehabilitation of old forms of Confucian philosophy, New Confucians take many different approaches to reconfiguring and repositioning meanings within Chinese culture. In chapter five, William Jankowiak, in "Ethnicity and Chinese identity: ethnographic insight and political positioning," discusses social, cultural, and historical aspects of conflicts over identity playing out along the Han-minority axis of ethnic relations. As this chapter suggests, the volatile and ambiguous intersections between ethnic identity and political agency in China presents a persistent challenge to contemporary attempts to define 'Chineseness,' where historical linkages mesh uneasily with geopolitics and the contingencies of the present.

Past and present also run together in David Clarke's chapter on modernity and Chinese art in the past century. Highly readable, his essay on the long-term trends in Chinese art from the Republican period to the twenty-first century comes at a time when modern Chinese art has gone global in scale and scope. The article provides a historical perspective that is sure to be informative and useful during a time when the international market for works of art is undergoing significant changes, with recent developments pointing to a downturn whose duration and effect remain unclear. Another chapter worth highlighting is Arif Dirlik's "Socialism in China: a historical overview," which contains a succinct summary of the overarching political developments in twentieth century China, sparse in detail but effective in conveying the importance and effects of socialism as theory and practice in China in a world historical context. Moreover, given its brief length, this chapter may function very well as a primer for undergraduate students on the topic.

While the authors present a varied look at the contexts for Chinese modernity since 1900, they do little to address the uneven modern experience in China during the past century, an inequality even more apparent as the "modern" has been defined by the infiltration of high technology and the urban lifestyle. Overall, however, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture* presents a thematically coherent, interesting, and useful guide to the multifaceted changes unfolding in China today.