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## **Modernity: A Rose with Thorns—Reflection on the Modernity of Sanitation Construction in the Late Qing Dynasty**

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Xinzhong YU, Luwei YANG

Research Institute of Social History in China, Nankai University

### **Abstract:**

On the basis of the author's previous series of empirical studies, this paper reflects on the "hygienic modernity" that shows in the development of Chinese health service. Originating from the West, the modern public health system has an enviable, illustrious appearance; at the same time it has a ubiquitous power that affects people's daily life. Besides the modernity of civilization progress, as well as order, cleanness, a more pleasant environment and lower chance of infection, hygiene also brings us economic and cultural hegemony, inequity, injustice, supervision and restrictions on the human body to some degree. By proposing these criticisms and reflections, the author not only aims at breaking through the modernization narrative that dominates today's Chinese historical studies on hygiene, but also tries to draw some historical references for rectifying the deviation of China's sanitation construction in the present and the future. The paper tries to point out that, paying too much emphasis on development and prosperity while ignoring the protection of the rights of the masses, might not bring benefit to the future progress of China in the long run.

**Key Words:** Late Qing dynasty, Public health modernity

China has accomplished some astonishing achievements since the economic reform of the last 30 years. While being highly praised for its great progress, Chinese people are often denounced for their "uncivilized" quality. Chinese are, on the one hand, proud of their remarkable progress on economic development, on the other hand worried about the uncivilized quality and morality.

It's very clear that "jiangweisheng"(paying attention to sanitation) is part of modern civilization, while "bujiangweisheng"(ignoring sanitation) shows an uncivilized quality."Bujiangweisheng", a stigma/label for Chinese people is very popular nowadays, while it was framed more than 100 years ago, during the introduction of Western civilization into china.

Though an ancient nation, China becomes a young, last-place student, who is supposed to learn everything, in the modern civilization system dominated by the West.

Taking sanitation as an example, it has been 100 years since China began to import and practice sanitation: facing a crisis of the demise of the nation, humiliated by labels like "bujiangweisheng" and "dongyabingfu"(weak man of the East Asia) and moved by the determination to save the nation and race, Chinese elites began their journey of focusing on body and sanitation, of practicing modern ideas of sanitation and of promoting public health systems in the late 19th century. Building modern public health systems in a Western way is an ongoing project for a developing nation like China, even today. Meanwhile, based on my study on the history of sanitation since the Qing Dynasty in the past decade, I find that the modern sanitary system derived from the West, though it looks like the symbol of modernity, becomes an omnipresent power affecting people's everyday life. The acceptance and pursuit of sanitation for Chinese society over 100 years could be compared to Sun Wukong's experience: he put on his golden hoop without realizing its function, while the golden hoop helped him become immortal.

The golden hoop easily reminds us of Tang Seng's "jinguzhou"(the Incantation of the Golden Hoop, which would cause the golden hoop to become smaller, causing unbearable pain to the wearer). The mere mention of golden hoop often remind us of the annoying "jinguzhou" instead of the merits of the hoop, its contribution to Sun Wukong's success, maybe we are impressed with Sun Wukong's courage and strong sense of justice while bored with Tang Seng's rigid personality.

On the contrary, when we talk about modern sanitation, we mean its modern nature and contribution to nation building, ignoring the politics and culture behind it, few of us pay attention to its intervention and restraint on the human body. The Golden Hoop and modern sanitation share much in common if we could avoid the blind points in each discussion.

Such comparisons are not intended to merely draw attention to, or deny, contributions made by modern sanitary systems to Chinese society, I just want to remind people of the other side of

sanitation rather than the one that shows modernity. What sanitation brings to us are hegemony and power in politics and culture, uneven and unjust in a sense, and monitoring and restraining of the human body, as well as order, better and tidier living conditions and lower infection rate. It is my hope to break the narrative mode of modernization<sup>1</sup> and the lack of consideration of "modernity" of sanitation in Chinese scholarship on the history of sanitation. I reach my conclusions based on my own study<sup>2</sup>:

Firstly, through discussions on excrement management and quarantine (especially the latter), we find that the modern public health system was not merely for guarding health, it had class and racial characteristics. Modern hygiene could benefit health, while it was a dominating factor over ethnicity, property and culture, it was a self-benefiting power order that was being carried out under the name of science and civilization.

Moreover, the importing and promotion of modern public health systems would contribute to improving the urban landscape and public health facility, lowering prevalence rates, and promoting the states' image, it is definitely a great achievement for the middle and upper classes. However, it meant a waste for the rabble. For them, reforms like excrement management only meant increasing tax and cost of acquiring excrement, while the so-called improvement of the city landscape was not a big thing. Practicing systems of sanitation and quarantine would at the same time harm people's interest and freedom. Therefore, achievements through modernization were accomplished at the cost of the interests of the weak, from the angle of sanitation. What health quarantine brought to China was sovereignty, health, civilization and progress, as well as the eroding, and invasion, of civil rights under the name of "weisheng" (sanitation) and civilization. Maybe we take for granted that the process of modernization cannot avoid sacrificing some people's profits, should we, however, turn our backs on people's rights and reasonable demands, or accuse them of being conservative,

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<sup>1</sup> For Chinese scholars' work on history of hygiene in China, please see my paper 《何为卫生——中国近世卫生史研究刍议》(On the relations of hygiene history and environmental history focusing on modern China history,《史学理论研究》2011, No.4.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Xinzhong, 「清末における「衛生」概念の展開」(Discussion on conceptual history of hygiene in Late Qing) 「東洋史研究」2005, Vol.64, No.3; 《清代江南的卫生观念与行为及其近代变迁初探——以环境和用水卫生为中心》(An initial study of sanitation concepts and behavior in Jiangnan during the Qing Dynasty and their vicissitudes in modern times), 《清史研究》,2006, No.2; 《从避疫到防疫: 晚清因疫病观念的演变》(From avoiding epidemic to quarantine: evolution of conceptions on disease in Late Qing), 《华中师范大学学报》2008, No.2; 《防疫·卫生·身体控制——晚清清洁观念和行为的演变》(Quarantine, hygiene, body control: transition of ideas and practice on sanitary in Late Qing), in 黄兴涛 eds., 《新史学》Vol.3, 中华书局 Zhonghua Shuju, 2009; "Treatment of Nightsoil and Waste in Modern China", in Angela Ki Che Leung and Charlotte Furth eds., Health and Hygiene in Chinese East Asia: Policies and Publics in the Long Twentieth Century, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010; 《晚清的卫生行政与近代身体的形成——以卫生防疫为中心》(Health administration and making of modern body in Late Qing: with a focus on quarantine), 《清史研究》2011, Vol. 4; 《复杂性与现代性: 晚清检疫机制引建中的社会反应研究》(Complexity and modernity: research on social reflex in building quarantine system in Late Qing), 《近代史研究》2012, No.2; 《清代城市水环境及其史料探析》, 《历史研究》待刊(Investigation on city watery environment and its' historical materials in Qing Dynasty), forthcoming.

ignorant and backward? Should we think twice when facing such sacrifices? I don't think we need a debate over it.

In the early Qing period, the nation rarely intervened with medical issues and lacked relative policies. While the construction of health administration in the late Qing period turned itself from individual, disorganized entities into a systematic, organized and official project. Increasing governmental intervention in public health, along with the establishment of a national *weisheng* administration, not only vividly showed functions of the state, but also showed the expansion of state power, though it was of necessity and legitimacy. However, the function of government would “rationally” expand boundlessly and hamper civil rights if we couldn't find out power relationships hidden in these institutions. Such “progress” and modern achievements meant nothing for the public.

Finally, the introduction of Western, modern experience since the late Qing period, under the name of science, civilization and progress, occurred under the unique historical background filled with domestic strife and foreign aggression. Though affected by foreign pressures such as the sovereignty crisis, it was the choice made by Chinese elites and gentries 100 years' ago, and it was part of the modernization of the nation and citizenship that they had pursued since modern times. Frankly speaking, local gentries and elites were obsessed with complicated reasons and thoughts when they made the decision. Actually, they didn't have the chance and time to really think over their action, in order to practice swiftly and easily, they had to simplify complicated situations into simple issues such as the protection of sovereignty and the pursuit of civilization and modernization. Nowadays, we could afford time to think over when making such decisions, we should not solicit their efforts and limitation. However, it is our responsibility to restore the complication of history, allowing people to discover the modernization of China and rethink modernity in a complicated historical canvas.

When we entered the historical situation, we shall present and understand history in a modest and objective way, then we examine the history of modernity of hygiene in China with hindsight. We might not feel so well, for such history which we often overlooked in the past, is still being presented in our lives. Whether these could be traced back to our overlook of history or they were unavoidable destiny during modernization? We might not get a perfect answer to this question, while our historians should think over if our simplified and vertical presentation of history has connection with simplified understanding on similar social issues in real society? Because history, in a sense, legitimizes real actions, at least in our culture.

Transition of quarantine in late Qing is only a beginning for the modernization of sanitation in Chinese society. Therefore this transition is often simplified in books on history of modern hygiene. However, presentation above tells us the importance of the beginning. "Weisheng" (hygiene) had become a social identity and a mainstream goal to pursue, and the Chinese government had made systematic laws on public health, especially on quarantine. What's more

important is that the character of “weisheng” that showed in the modernization process in 20th century China, had been interpreted in transformations that happened in the late Qing period. Institutionalization of hygiene was on its way. Even though many epidemics, and acute infectious diseases in particular, imperiled the health of the Chinese population and influenced Chinese society, in the large majority of cases the epidemics that people paid most attention to in the early part of the twentieth century, like plague, smallpox, and cholera, were not, after all, a particularly significant cause of death for the population as a whole. That public health was so fixated on acute epidemics is doubtlessly related to the panic they caused and the impact that these diseases had on society. In other words, while the focus of public health was related to protecting health, at the same it was perhaps even more concerned with social stability and the public’s impression of the government. The examples discussed above show clearly that the motivating factors in the construction of public health were often social and political, and their implementation frequently had aspects of politicization, to the point where we can say that a number of health-related affairs were ultimately political affairs.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, the first health-related tasks carried out by the Qing court and local officials were not connected to epidemics per se. During the Manchurian Plague in the late Qing era, the primary motivating factor in why the Qing government exhausted all its resource on epidemic prevention was the pressure of international opinion and to prevent the erosion of national sovereignty by the Great Powers. Consequently, the ‘plague prevention’ efforts were placed under the direction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Though its direct primary goal was cleanliness for the sake of epidemic prevention, its background did also include the intention of the state, on the one hand, to increase its control over the bodies of the population. We have seen how epidemic diseases were used in many cases as a pretext for political action, and how the rise of a large number of public health projects is consequently not something that can be explained entirely by a superficial statement about safeguarding the health of the masses. More important were successive governments’ manipulations of health-related social ideologies and public opinion to safeguard and convey the legitimacy of their rule.

Clearly, whether we are discussing epidemics or public health, neither of these are phenomena that can be explained and grasped entirely by science alone but both include profound social, political, and cultural factors.<sup>4</sup> The issue of hygiene is not only a matter about medicine and institution, is not only about scientific explanation, in fact, it gets involved with society, politics and culture. The Western scholarship has reached a common view on this issue, meanwhile, this issue is often overlooked in history of 20th century China. Arriving at the end of the last

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<sup>3</sup> Please see Yu Xinzhong, 《20 世纪的疫病与公共卫生》 (Epidemics and Public Health in Twentieth-Century China), forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> See Byron J. Good, *Medicine, rationality and experience: an anthropological perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 1994; Arthur Kleinman, *The illness narratives: suffering, healing, and the human condition*, Basic books, 1988; *Social origins of distress and disease: depression, neurasthenia, and pain in Modern China*, Yale University Press, 1988.

century, the appearance and ceaseless expansion of AIDS has propelled researchers and healthcare workers to begin paying attention to the non-medical factors of epidemics and public health. It has prompted social questions regarding the process of epidemic prevention, such as the fair distribution of healthcare-related resources, the vilification of a disease, and social discrimination. On a deeper level, it has also stimulated reflections on such questions as the right to health and life and the excessive expansion of state power and authority. In other words, people have already begun to critically examine the twentieth-century myth of the modernization of healthcare. Regarding the purpose of healthcare, they no longer zoom in on ethnic and national strength and prosperity and on economic interests but more frequently on ensuring the rights of the individual. At the same time, they no longer regard the state's expansion and implementation of functions in the domain of healthcare and the concomitant expansion of authority as inherently appropriate and a matter of course. Such uncommon interesting thoughts seem to suggest us a new character to public sanitation in the new century. People's health and body, which were being nationalized during the building of public sanitation systems in 20th century, seem to grasp the rights they are supposed to have.

When we review the development of public sanitation since Late Qing, we find that we can further see that in the early period the creation of structures for the administration of healthcare with the primary goal of cleanliness was primarily a function of transformations taking place in systems of management. The establishment of research and development facilities like the Central Office for Epidemic Prevention demonstrates that the construction of public health was relying more and more heavily on the power and progress of science. Arriving at the end of the last century, the appearance and ceaseless expansion of AIDS has impelled people to begin to reflect more and more critically on the cognitive model of resolving healthcare problems solely from the angles of biomedical science and public health. Instead they advocate that we draw on social and cultural aspects of epidemics and public health, base ourselves in society, and use multi- and interdisciplinary, multidirectional, and cooperative approaches to solve problems of healthcare.<sup>5</sup>

Fine sanitary, especially public health is the long pursuit of state building and modernization for Chinese people in 20th century. It is a goal, even today, of Chinese society to construct a fair and relatively well developed national public sanitary system. There is no doubt that the construction of a public sanitation system in 20th century has brought tremendous progress for Chinese society, while, in some places, such developments stay at a primitive stage. Some people might hold a view that my critics and reflections on hygiene, which is taken for granted as a benefit for public health and national prosperity, are overly picky and hypercritical. And here I emphasis again, it is not my intention to deny the value and meaning of building a public health system for Chinese society. I just demonstrate that such merits have been frequently

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<sup>5</sup> Please see Yu Xinzhong, 《20 世纪的疫病与公共卫生》(Epidemics and Public Health in Twentieth-Century China).

displayed and interpreted in current works. Meanwhile, the acceptance of its value and meaning does not preclude the possibility, and need, to make criticisms and reflections on its problems and shortcomings. Making such criticisms and reflections is not only aimed at breaking the popular narrative mode used in current studies on the history of hygiene, but also at providing historical resources for reference to make further contributions to building public health system for the present and future. Furthermore, such criticisms and reflections demonstrate that over-emphasizing development and prosperity while overlooking civil rights, in the long term, may not be the evangelism for development of Chinese nation.

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