

# Modern woman in crisis: Xia De-hong's revolutionary subjectivity as modernity process

## Theodore Rose

### **Background for Essay**

*In Wild Swans (1991), Jung Chang gives readers a tour of culture and politics in 20<sup>th</sup> century China. Jung writes a personal family history beginning with her grandmother's experiences early in the century and ending with her (Jung) departure to Britain in 1978. Jung explores ideas and projects surrounding communism, modernization, and revolution. Her mother, Xia De-hong, is central to this narrative.*

*Xia was born in 1931 to a police general and a concubine and grew up amidst civil and imperial wars and rampant economic depression in China. Constant harassment from the general's family forced her mother to flee the home with Xia. Her mother married an elderly doctor when Xia was four. The three lived in Manchuria, which was occupied by Japan from 1931-1945. The Japanese army imposed second-class citizenship on Manchu residents and used youths repressively in its imperial campaign. Xia learned to honor and obey "Great Japan" in school and worked in a textile factory to serve the Japanese war effort. She developed a deep resentment for Japan's discriminatory and violent practices against Chinese civilians and an idealistic hope about the possibilities of Chinese nationalism.*

*Soon after Japan surrendered to China's Communist-Kuomintang allied forces in 1945, the Chinese alliance broke. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists began fighting for control of China. Xia joined the Communists as an underground student organizer and teacher. She was devoted to Maoist-Marxism and*

*its promises of utopian equality across class and gender lines. When Kuomintang officials arrested her, her devotion to the Communist movement intensified and she gained more responsibilities once released. Xia married a veteran Communist member named Shou-yu early in 1949. The Communists defeated the Kuomintang army and founded the People's Republic of China later that year.*

## **Essay**

Dominant discourses of modernity have always positioned traditional cultures as their antithesis. These narratives are infused with a romantic absolutism, which claims modern life as freedom, progress, and truth. Though highly desirable, these things tend to be inaccessible. Modernity, thus, becomes a frustrating enterprise filled with inconsistency and uncertainty.

This essay attempts to unlock such problems by identifying modernity as fluid – contingent and subjective – cultural processes infused by power relations. Using Jung Chang's memoir of twentieth century China, I discuss how Xia De-hong's (Jung's mother) formation of revolutionary subjectivity was centered on feminist values about *modern Chinese woman*. Finally, I detail how the official Chinese revolutionary movement's stance on modernity, which hinged on a masculine-nationalist ideology, created Xia's crisis.

Modernity projects in marginalized regions, as Rofel (1999) noted, occur within colonial and neocolonial power structures. European colonialism and racism diffused beliefs that only the Western model of social order could achieve "truth, reason, and progress" (Rofel 10) – thus, inventing other models as traditional and backward. Such assumptions centralized Western history and identities in modernity processes. Modernization demanded people eliminate their *traditional* systems and mimic the European way for the sake of progress.

Modernity demands the creation of subjects who are willing to act in the name of

progress. Subjectivity, one's way of knowing, doing, and being, is bounded by culture and power. Power operates not only in structural arrangements and "macroinstitutions", but also in the "very formation of bodies and desires" (Rofel 11). Knowledge and practices people take in the name of progress and freedom "are figured by and within, rather than externally to, regimes of power" (Rofel 11).

People experience modernity through the conscious space of the imagination. Such a space is neither "biological," nor static (Fei 1992: 137), but is characterized by mobile realms and "subtle and overt contests over meanings" (Rofel 13). For Rofel, the cultural imaginary is filled with meanings about the material relations people find themselves, memories of the past, and hopes for the future. Allegories, claims, and narratives of modernity in this space always carry "ideological interests" and moral guidelines for action (Rofel 290). Such constructions are embedded within and reinforce particular power relations.

Xia's formation of revolutionary subjectivity is exemplary of modernity processes. Xia adopted her subjectivity during the violent 1940s, a period of imperial and civil wars in China by local and global powers. She assumed a "non-continuous break" with traditional China and its "irrationalities" and an attachment to the "humanism" and "feminism" of "Enlightenment" in the West (Rofel 10, 11, 44). Her cultural imaginary of modernity must be perceived through her beliefs and practices in the 1940s.

Xia learned lessons about Chinese femininity through the women in her family, at her school, and on the streets in the early 1940s. Her grandmother suffered immensely from her husband and prayed to be reincarnated as a "cat" or "dog" (Chang 1991: 67). Her uncle locked up her aunt in "solitary confinement" until she "went mad" (Chang 91). Xia had classmates and friends who were forced into marriages by their families. Popular beliefs stated explicitly that women were properties of their male-headed families. Young girls could be sold for a mere "10 kilos of rice" during times of economic crisis (Chang 97).

Xia rejected strongly the moral ethos of the traditional woman, who she felt was too passive. She anguished over the oppression of women in her life. In the same breath, she “looked askance” at their inability to overcome the system (Chang 71). The liberal nature of her stepfather and her financial status allowed Xia to develop a sense that she would defeat “the barbarity of age-old customs” (Chang 91).

Xia pursued activities and goals that transgressed traditional cultural boundaries of womanhood. She discarded her high school’s teachings of the “way of the woman” (Chang 70). Her demands for happiness, love and monogamy in marriage opposed traditional norms. As a result, she refused all the men who proposed to marry her, including Kuomintang officers and their military and political might. She neared western feminism in her beliefs of “free marriages” (Rofel 40, 51). After a quarrel with her parents over marriage, she moved out the house and violated traditional ethics of gendered space (Rofel 73)<sup>1</sup>.

The Chinese socialist revolutionary movement appealed to Xia’s desires for change and amplified those desires. Socialist discourse helped Xia, like other women, view gender and patriarchy as “contingent cultural form” rather than a “natural artifact of fate” (Rofel 63). Previous distrusts for patriarchy, “morality” and “tradition” pressed Xia to join the revolution (Chang 91). Furthermore, socialist “cultural representations” and “interpretation of experience” were “hegemonic” in her city (Rofel 18, 26). She saw no alternatives for ending “injustices against women” (Chang 93).

Consequently, “disjunctures of modernity” evolved out of Xia’s attachment to the socialist movement (Rofel 6). Her imaginary of modernity was framed by her absolute truths and beliefs of equal rights and women’s rights. Official socialist modernity did not

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rofel, pre-socialist Chinese gender roles involved spatial metaphors, in which women were suppose to stay inside the home and men could go outside. Women who worked outside brought shame to themselves and degraded the social status of their families. De-hong, however, was not shamed by her transgression of the inside/outside metaphor for at least two reasons. First, her work was valued because of her proximity to the intellectual class. Secondly, she was adamant that leaving home was correct and *modern*.

share her exact stance on feminism and humanism. Nationalism motivated official socialist knowledge and practice of modernity. Moreover, the revolution proceeded to install the Maoist state through certain core principles and structures of traditional society.

Socialist modernity projects were steered more by *masculinism* and nationalism than by humanism. The revolutionary movement's imaginary of modernity was dominated by a desire to overcome "western domination" (Rofel 17). This resulted in the detachment from "feudal tradition" in the movement's narratives and the institutionalization of women's liberation (Rofel 25, 26)<sup>2</sup>. Motives to gain relative power in international relations allowed nation-statism and industrialization to direct official socialist modernity projects<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, such motives imposed a redefinition of *work* as a "fundamental social virtue" and *women's liberation* as freedom to produce "surplus value for the state" (Rofel 26, 75, 76).

Maoist China implemented a modern state with traditional structures. The revolutionaries replaced "imperial polity" and "kinship" relations with a "new mythos of the polity" and a "new moral discourse of the nation" (Rofel 25, 26). But the traditional egocentric system and its *chaxugeju* (differential mode of association) remained. As Fei (74) noted, ascribed ethical rules and codes guided social relations in Chinese rural societies. The most important of these moral qualities is *ren* (benevolence), which involves "subduing yourself and submitting to ritual" (Fei 75). *Ren* manifested in the socialist state through the construction of "subaltern consciousness" (Rofel 27). The state "assigned rules of behavior" to govern national projects and structures through the

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<sup>2</sup> The saying "if you can't beat them, join them" applies here. Rofel noted the socialist revolution "rejected western domination even as it proceeded to invoke the Enlightenment assumptions embedded in socialism" (Rofel 17). Chinese socialist modernity followed western standards of modernity. The humanist discourse of women's rights prevailed because of the "state's ideological investment in woman as sign of socialist modernity" (Rofel 51).

<sup>3</sup> The drive for nationalism showed a disconnection with traditional modes of social order. According to Fei, the "concept" of the modern state was "absent from Chinese rural society" (70). But nationalism differed also from the feminist framework. Modernity projects guided by nationalism (and Marxism) led China into a betrayal of Euro-American feminists and their counterparts in China, according to Rofel.

subaltern subject (Fei 91)<sup>4</sup>.

The centralization of the Chinese Communist Party in Maoist China mirrored the role of family and kinship in traditional structures. According to Fei, the family was centered on all activities of rural societies. Patrilineages controlled all “functions” of the society, “political, economic, religious” (Fei 84). The nationalization of work enabled the socialist state to operate “in a manner analogous a family” (Rofel 108). This, in turn, pulled people of the period, including Xia’s husband, “into an overarching loyalty” to the state “rather than familial relations” (Rofel 108).

The Maoist regime installed the same traditional arrangements that revolutionaries like Xia desired to eliminate. Institutionalizing an “ideological discipline” of subalternity and a “moral/political system of rewards and punishment” granted the state its hegemonic power (Rofel 27). The socialist emphasis on “discipline” and “subsistence rights” did not trail far from traditional discourses (Chang 120, 137, Dutton 19, Fei 85). Maoist stress on “obligation rather than rights” and on “complete submission to the Party” followed the rules of *ren* (Chang 120, Dutton 19).

The latent force of *ren* in socialist modernity created tension for Xia as a revolutionary subject. She opposed fundamentally the use of “morality” and *ren* as a domination and patriarchal tool (Chang 91). She wanted the freedom to choose her practices of *ren* (though her choices were created and bounded by culture and power). But she was attached to a socialist movement that demanded she follow rigidly ascribed rules of loyalty and ways of giving (*li*) her “self” (Dutton 40). She deviated from this “discipline” in her relations with her husband, friends, and parents. As a result, she was criticized and reprimanded several times for placing private interests above that of the “revolution” and “modernity.”

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<sup>4</sup> The state applied “ethical, political and symbolic gravitas” to all social practices (Rofel 27). Those activities that promoted “industrial expansion,” namely labor, were promoted as benevolent and moral (Rofel 46). Peasants and working classes who were properly subjected to the state were heroes in official socialist modernity narratives.

In conclusion, modernity occurs through dynamic and fluid cultural processes. However, power regimes at all structural levels, international or domestic, tend to diffuse a discourse of modernity as universal and static. Such narratives intend to represent particular knowledge and practices of modernity as “progressive,” “truth” and “highly-desirable.” Yet, the active adoption of *ways of being modern* by subjects disrupts modernity and displays its “gaps, fissures, and instabilities” (Rofel 3).

Xia illustrated modernity as process through her adoption of revolutionary subjectivity in the 1940s. She rejected the morality and subjectivity of the traditional women, who she felt was passive and powerless. She longed for the emancipation of the Chinese “woman.” Her ideological interests in humanism and feminism differed dramatically from that of the official socialist revolution. The Maoist regime desired nation-statism and industrial expansion and used traditional forms, especially *ren*, for such ends. Xia was isolated and marginalized in this process – thus, becoming a modern woman in crisis.

## **Bibliography**

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