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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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REVIEWS

MODERN ERASURES: REVOLUTION, THE CIVILIZING MISSION, AND THE SHAPING OF CHINA'S PAST

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Pierre Fuller, *Modern Erasures: Revolution, the Civilizing Mission, and the Shaping of China's Past*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 362 pp. (ISBN9781009026512)

Modern Erasures represents the culmination of the extensive research of Pierre Fuller, a prominent scholar whose primary focus has concerned Chinese political cultures, crucially during periods of rural crises in the 19th and 20th centuries. The book is dedicated to the examination of silences and erasures, specifically those that have facilitated the development of universal and modernist narratives related to humanitarian action and solidarity. Feeding on the dialectic between knowledge destruction and physical violence during the Maoist period, *Modern Erasures* aims to explore the intertwined relation between the Western civilizing missions in China and the revolutionary program of Mao Zedong, as both of them were directed to Chinese rural communities.

Prior to Fuller, scholars like Deleuze, Guattari and Hevia focused on colonialism as part of the growth of the capitalist structure. Fuller, however, demonstrates how these capitalist processes relate to the reinterpretation of humanitarian positions and to the perception of communities seen as “backwards” (p. 23).¹ The Cultural Revolution is commonly understood as a repudiation of all things associated with or representing the West. Contrastingly, Fuller utilizes the prism of revolutionary and communal memory to scrutinize the trajectory of the Cultural Revolution, and this analysis leads to the thought-provoking thesis that the Cultural Revolution is fundamentally an “outgrowth of colonial modernity” (p. 292).

1. Deleuze G., Guattari F. (1977) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, New York: Viking Press, 222–40. 63; Hevia J. (2003) *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth Century China*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 21–27, 128–42.



Modern Erasures proceeds by analyzing different media, crucially pièces of writing, Western and Chinese novels, theatrical works, local gazettes and woodcuts, in the fifty years between the May Fourth Movement (1919) and the peak of the Cultural Revolution in 1969.

The research is organized into four parts.

Part I, titled 'Seeing and Not Seeing,' focuses on the perception of writers and activists regarding certain phenomena in rural China during the 1920s, specifically environmental crises such as famine and earthquakes, and social and cultural uprisings, such as the May Fourth Movement. The name of the first part stems from the media's decision to represent or not represent such events. The first chapter investigates how crisis events were addressed and, more importantly, remembered; the second chapter deals with the reception of the May Fourth Movement in university circles, which aimed at the reformist and revolutionary transformation of China. The third chapter focuses on the interpretation of those same crisis events and the support by the West. Crucially, it demonstrates how the ideas of Chinese intellectuals of that period owed a debt to Western exegesis on the value attributed to human life and solidarity in 1920s China.

The second part, 'Revolutionary Memory in Republican China,' analyzes the evolution of revolutionary memory through cultural production during the 1920s and 1930s, demonstrating how accounts of the impact of famine and earthquakes were excluded from liberal narratives. The fourth chapter considers children's magazines and textbooks on civic education and history, while the fifth chapter focuses on Shanghai newspapers and party reports, critically examining the development of the term 'lieshen' (evil peasants) in the context of the Guomindang and Communist codification of rural life. The sixth chapter analyzes the reduction of complex rural communities to peasantries, both in artistic and academic works. Examining the impact of Pearl Buck's 'The Good Earth' and Mao Qijun's 'Sociology and Social Issues', Fuller shows how such communities were stigmatized as "essentially lacking the social chemistry to organize" (p. 154): not knowing "how to work together; there is nothing to arouse social awareness" (p. 156).² The development of visceral 'muke' (woodcuts) by communist artists is illustrated in the seventh chapter, shedding light on the transformation of depicted subjects: from urban characters, to the proletariat, to those termed 'forsaken subjects' from 1945 to 1949, namely individuals outside social and civic networks in rural areas.

Part III, 'Maoist Narratives in the 40s,' illustrates the inculcation of Maoist morality first in Yan'an and later in cities and rural areas. According to the author, this occurred through the production of theatrical works

2. Buck P. (1939) Introduction to *My Country and My People*, by Lin Yutang. London: W. Heinemann; Mao Q. (1933) 毛起鵠. *Shehui xue ji shehui wenti* 社會學及社會問題. Shanghai: Minzhi shuju.

like ‘Chi Ye He’ and through youth association newspapers such as ‘Minzhu Gingnian’, as depicted in Chapters eight and nine.

The fourth and final part explores the dialectic between the two types of memory—revolutionary and communal—that has evolved in the People’s Republic. In the tenth and eleventh chapters, ‘Wenshi Ziliao’ (cultural and historical materials) are compared with local records from the 1920s to explore how perceptions of rural life in the past were instrumentalized during the agrarian reforms of 1949. The twelfth chapter delves into the reinforcement of revolutionary memory following the economic and social debacle of the Great Leap Forward, while the last chapter demonstrates the extent to which the tension between communal and revolutionary memory elucidates the potency of the political narrative of the People’s Republic of China.



Modern Erasures sets out from the intriguing premise of addressing a question overlooked by historians, that is, what aspects of ‘peasants’ culture were erased during the collapse of pre-revolutionary rural China, giving rise to the very title of the work. The book aims to focus on a category not widely considered, namely, rural China in villages and small towns of the 20th century (p. 10). Drawing inspiration from the tradition of Lucien Bianco’s research, the book redirects attention to local gazettes ‘difangzhi’ and first-hand accounts showcasing the richness of rural China.³

Examining the phenomena of silence and erasure might seem like a theoretical stretch. Nonetheless, Fuller’s insightful strategy involves tackling the scarcity of testimonies by concentrating on catastrophic events and their communal responses; this choice is justified by the assumption that such events would likely have garnered attention from journalists and documentarians. Focusing on episodes of crisis allows the historian to observe the interplay between emphasis and erasure of solidarity policies in rural areas, a terrain otherwise epistemologically inaccessible and obscure. Additionally, the book employs a creative approach by scrutinizing realistic literature, civic education manuals, and artistic production to explore the formulation of distinctly Chinese public morality and its potential omission from the accounts of 20th-century intellectuals. Its objective is not to provide an exact representation of historical realities, but rather to document what both Chinese and Western individuals have written or omitted concerning Chinese communal life. The goal is to identify variations and contextualize the writings within a broader experience of modernity.

The book succeeds in demonstrating how the nationalism and campaigning of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) owe a debt to the erasure of certain aspects of rural Chinese cultural life. On a point of observation,

3. Bianco L. (1971), *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915–1949*, trans. Muriel Bell, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 87, 90.

the insightful aim to generalize the universal drive towards modernity amid contingent crises is tempered by a potential limitation. Overlooking power transition elements not directly tied to crises may compromise the intended universality. This calls for further exploration in subsequent research, adding complexity and prompting readers to critically engage with the author's perspective.

The author's brilliant insight lies in his astute analysis of crisis events to unveil what was erased by the epistemic violence of Maoist ideologies within rural Chinese culture. This innovative approach not only sheds light on overlooked facets but also encourages readers to reconsider the intricate layers of a cultural heritage marred by Maoist influences. *Modern Erasures* is an important and timely read for scholars and graduate students who are interested in the history and sociology of 20th century China.