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Chapter One

Introduction: Chinese Modernity and the Individual Psyche

Andrew B. Kipnis

The topics of modernity and individualism have a long and rich history in Western social theory. Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, and Nikolas Rose have all written at length about them. Needless to say, what constitutes modernity, individualism, individuation, and the individual psyche are multifaceted and contested matters; more controversial still are the links between what is referred to by these signs, that is, whether contemporary processes of what is often called individualization are best depicted as arising in capitalism and the Protestant reformation (Weber 1992; 1978), industrialization and nation building (Durkheim 1960; 1973; 1979; 1992), urbanization (Simmel 1971), wage labor and capitalist alienation (Marx and Engels 1886), neoliberalism (Rose 1996), second-order or reflexive modernity (Giddens 1991), second modernity or risk society (Beck et al. 1994), liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), or discipline and punishment (Foucault 1979). Summaries and syntheses of theories regarding individualism and individuation are almost as common as original writings on the topic itself, and I could not possibly attempt another one here.\(^1\) Rather, by citing the diversity of social theorists who have written about this topic, I want to begin by pointing out that something about the structure of feeling surrounding the individual in modern societies has engendered reflection from a broad range of social theorists.

Such reflection is growing among anthropologists observing the rapid industrialization, marketization, urbanization, and social change taking place in contemporary China. Yunxiang Yan’s recent book (2009), The Individualization of Chinese Society, reprints a series of his essays that depict ordinary Chinese breaking away from the social constraints of the Maoist era. They marry without
the blessings of their parents, consume to please themselves, and migrate around the country without approval from the heads of their collectives or work units. In the language of social theorists like Giddens, these people can be said to become disembedded from local social structures. Yan frames these changes in comparison with the “individualization thesis” of theorists like Beck, Bauman and Giddens (see also, Yan 2010b). These theorists attempt to differentiate contemporary patterns of individuation from those that took place under the earlier modernity described by Durkheim, Marx, and Weber by claiming the importance of “second modernity” or “liquid modernity” and heightened degrees of reflexivity and recognition of risk. As Yan rightly points out, there are many differences between the individualization described by the theorists of second modernity and that which he observed in China.

First of all, over the past two decades, while Europe was experiencing a rolling back of the welfare state, China was experiencing a breaking of the tight institutional structures that curtailed individual freedoms during much of the Maoist era. Those who draw parallels between the rollback of the welfare state in Europe and the dismantling of state-owned enterprises in China neglect the fact that in China, under Mao, 90 percent of the people lived in rural areas where there were no state-owned enterprises or welfare benefits and limited economic security. The rigid combination of the household registration system and the planned economy prevented most Chinese citizens from obtaining goods and services outside of their home districts, physically preventing most forms of travel and making it easy for local political leaders to dominate all aspects of the lives of those living within their jurisdiction (especially for the vast majority of rural inhabitants). This system also intensified the control parents had over their children, as finding a job on the rural commune or in the local labor market often required the help of parents. Yan points out that during the evolution away from this system, the issuing of national identity cards, so easily analyzable as a structure of state control (cf. Dutton 1998: 94–99), actually constituted a form of liberation, as the identity cards enabled their holders to legally travel throughout the country without the permission of anyone else. National identity cards constitute a form of individuated identity that is not controlled by the leader of one’s collective farm, work unit (danwei), street committee, or household head. The possibility of (individually-determined) physical mobility, the rise of national labor markets for migrant laborers, and the increasing education of youth relative to their parents have also empowered youth
in relation to their elders, especially in rural areas. If the rollback of the welfare state in Europe was a stick that forced citizens to accept greater risk and greater individual responsibility for their economic well-being, in China the demise of the planned economy, at least for young people of rural origins, has been a rollback of the systems of control that used to permeate their lives.

While Yan’s discussion illuminates the social processes through which individuals were cut loose from the political and social controls of Mao-era institutions, he is less precise about the newer forms of social control and socialization that this so-called liberation of the individual has entailed. While he points out the importance of the coercive aspects of Beck’s individuation thesis (individuals face no choice other than individuating themselves, see especially Yan 2010a), and while he mentions both the fact of individuals being reembedded in society through their need to rely on social connections to find jobs, and the fact that much of the so-called individualism emerging in China seems like a species of conformity, he does not specify the mechanisms by which so much conformity and reembedding emerge. Because he uses the newer theorists of second-order modernization as his point of departure, he misses some of the insights that theorists of first-order modernization (Marx, Weber, and especially Durkheim and Foucault) might have provided, that is, the relationship of concern about the individual to industrialization, urbanization, labor markets, nation building, and religious tradition.

A second work of interest is the Privatizing China volume, edited by Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (2008). Like Yan, Ong and Zhang (2008) see an emergence of the individual during the post-Mao era, but see this individual as caught between the neoliberal logic of entrepreneurs competing in the capitalist marketplace and the sovereignty of the socialist state. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led state tries to “keep its distance” when it can, but is always ready to step in and impose limits on individual expression when necessary. Ong and Zhang argue against those liberal theorists who see political liberalization (which might be termed the empowerment of individuals as political actors) as an inevitable outcome of economic liberalization and argue that strategies of economic liberalization and “governing from a distance” can be used by authoritarian governments to maintain their power. The essays in Zhang and Ong’s volume are necessarily more diverse than those of Yan, but, taken as a whole, their emphasis on the mechanisms by which the Communist Party maintains control, while enabling various forms of individual
distinction to emerge, supplement Yan’s focus on the disembedding of the individual from the institutional binds that existed under Maoist rule.

A third multiauthored volume, titled *Deep China*, also stresses the contrast between entrepreneurial freedoms and political un-freedom. This contradiction, Kleinman et al. (2011) argue, leads to a particular form of the divided self in which sufferings and opinions that are too politically sensitive to express must be repressed or held in a deeply private space in order to allow the entrepreneurial self to succeed. The vast majority of good jobs in China today—those in health care, education, management, banks, state-owned enterprises, utilities, and the vast and sprawling bureaucracy itself—are located in places where giving voice to forms of political expression that the CCP dislikes would lead to career suicide. Kleinman et al. use the image of an owl with one eye open and one eye shut as a metaphor for this divided self. The open eye takes in all that is necessary to get ahead in everyday life while the shut eye protects the privacy of an inner self that feels and senses things that, for reasons of political caution, it should not and cannot express.

The essays collected here build on insights from these volumes but take a somewhat different perspective. First of all, we adopt a multifaceted approach to the concept of “modernity.” This term is often criticized because political elites use it ideologically to disparage everything and anything that is opposed by the developmental states they administer. If, for example, agricultural officials see a certain form of farming as inefficient, they will mock it as outmoded “tradition” and urge farmers to adopt more “modern” methods. What exactly is “modern” thus lies in the eye of the beholder and involves judgments about what will or should have a future rather than what merely exists in the present. While certainly agreeing with critiques of rigid, ideological, and linear forms of modernization theory, we retain the term modernity for two reasons. First, we self-consciously make our own judgments about which social forces and practices are important in the present and are likely to have an impact on China’s future. We call the constellation of the forces and practices that we judge to be important for China’s future “Chinese modernity.” Second, in making these judgments about what is important, we want to be sure not to ignore those social processes that were analyzed by the classic social theorists of Western “modernization” and that are unrolling in China today at an historically unprecedented pace and scale—that is to say industrialization, urbanization, and nation-building.
Western theorists who build their theories through an examination of European and North American societies since the 1970s pronounce the importance of framing contemporary individuation in a “high” or “liquid” modernity that comes after a first-order modernity. In so doing, they imply a particular historical metanarrative that is in many respects inappropriate for China. They suggest that first comes industrialization, urbanization, and nation-building; only afterwards comes globalization, the Internet, time-space compression, postindustrial societies, heightened reflexivity, the dismantling of the welfare state, neoliberalism, and so on. In contemporary China, to a greater extent than in Europe or North America, these social processes can be seen as developing simultaneously rather than sequentially, and it is not hard to argue that it is the social changes named by the classic social theorists that have been most consequential. For a rural population embedded in face-to-face, kinship-based social relations, the shift to the anonymity of the city and national labor markets, as well as the alienation of industrial labor, can be shocking. Moreover, the rapid and psychologically shocking geographic, social, and economic social mobility that can accompany any form of social change must be seen as a powerful consequence of both first-order and second-order modernities.  

As a consequence of this emphasis, the social theorists we engage with differ to those emphasized in previous volumes. Durkheim, Simmel, Marx, and the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* figure much more heavily in our imagination than Bauman, Beck, governmentality theory, or Giddens. Ling-Yun Tang, for example, focuses on the resonances of Simmel’s theories of art and alienation and Adorno’s critique of mass culture within the contemporary Chinese art scene; Andrew Kipnis examines the relevance of Foucault’s analyses of normalization and Durkheim’s discussions of nation-building to the educational subjectification of Chinese children; Wanning Sun refers to the works of Marx, Simmel, and Raymond Williams to illuminate themes of alienation in the poetry of migrant workers.

For us, however, the complexity of Chinese modernity is not simply a matter of what European theorists have seen as first-order and second-order modernity. As Alexander Woodside (2006) has argued, the sources of any modernity are multiple and stretch beyond industrialism and capitalism. Two further sources of Chinese modernity can be called China’s “premodern modernity” and China’s socialist modernity. By China’s premodern modernity, we refer to two equally important facts. First, people in China, like those anywhere, have cultural traditions (certainly not unchanging, but
continually reinvented and reappropriated in ever evolving social contexts) to deal with the entanglements of individual bodies with families and societies—methods of dealing with sickness or death, with child-rearing, sexual desire, and so on. Practitioners of various forms of what today are considered religion, superstition, or even (in the case of various forms of Chinese medicine, qigong, or martial arts training) science, consciously reinvent these practices in relation to earlier forms. Despite the moves of some social theorists to ignore these practices or to dismiss them as outmoded cultural relics (perhaps in reaction to the efforts of certain nationalist intellectuals in China to reify them as a cultural essence), these practices remain important resources for training, calming, and cultivating individual psyches.

Second, imperial China was a state society long before it was an industrial society. While the size of the state has grown drastically with the onset of modernity (Duara 1988), the arts of statecraft, including those relevant to the governing of the individual psyche, have a long history in China. While hardly unchanging, these arts are often drawn upon in the present. Popular practices of resisting these methods (such as relying on personal connections to bypass the imperatives of state bureaucracies (see Yang 1994)) also have a long history. This history makes our imagination of China very different to scholars who investigate parts of the world where “the state” only arrives with Western imperialism and insipient industrialization. Alexander Woodside (2006) powerfully presents the modernity of the examination system, the bureaucracy and the modes of governing the population that existed in “premodern” China, Korea, and Vietnam. He stresses the importance placed on “modern” notions like transparency, poverty alleviation, and the identification of talent within the imperial bureaucracies as well as the way certain debates among imperial bureaucrats had a strikingly “modern” tone. Many methods of governing the individual psyche in contemporary China are consciously identified with this tradition.

Socialism is another source of Chinese modernity. In contemporary China, the socialism of Maoist China, as it drew on the socialisms of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, is simultaneously a target of a politically motivated nostalgia, a source of dreams and plans about creating a utopian future and the time during which many of the contemporary institutions of governing the Chinese population were first established. The household registration system (Wang 2005), the ethnic classification system (Mullaney 2011), the Leninist party–state (Perry 2007), and the
propaganda apparatus (Brady 2012) were all developed then as were the practices by which the Party reaches out to diverse sectors of society (see, for example, Thornton 2012; U 2012) and the systemizing of local forms of policy experimentation (Heilmann 2008). The birth control policy emerged on the cusp of the reform era and was designed during a period when ideas about social and economic planning were particularly powerful (Greenhalgh 2008).

All of these practices and institutions remain important today. The household registration system, which assigns certain employment, housing, education, health, and welfare rights according to the locality where a given individual is registered, continues to make migrant laborers second-class citizens in the districts where they work. The birth control policy has sped the rate of demographic transition in China, making one-child families (in urban areas) and one and two-child families (in most rural areas) commonplace. The ethnic identities recognized during the ethnic classification project of the 1950s have been embraced by the vast majority of Chinese citizens, including those who rebel against the rule of the Han ethnic majority. Most importantly, memories of socialist ideals and rhetoric continue to inform the manner in which people think about the individual psyche.

Our complex vision of Chinese modernity allows us to bring a strong sense of irony to the topic of individualism and modernity. We see no simple linear relation between modernity and individuality whereby humans become more and more individualized as their societies become more and more modern. Rather the “individualization” of modernity must be seen as a myth, or a structure of feeling, or a problematic. The liberation of the individual is simultaneously her or his enslavement to wider social forces; differentiation is often accompanied by conformity, and estrangement or alienation by freedom. Premodern people were individuals as well and modern people remain socially constructed. In short, we see the “rise” of individualism as more of a psychological problematic than an absolute social fact. The attention paid to the individual psyche by governments, by educational and medical institutions, and by factories may increase and people may feel increasingly alienated, liberated, lonely, isolated, and free, but that does not mean that human beings have become social isolates. The political, social, and collective projects of cultivating and subjugating the individual are more powerful than ever. By placing the phrase “individual psyche” at the center of our efforts and emphasizing the psychological dimensions of contemporary Chinese individualism, we mean to highlight this irony. By using this term, however, we do not imply that our methods or foci
are purely psychological. The individual psyche has never been and never will be a domain governed solely by socially isolated individuals. It is the site of conflicts between numerous contradictory discourses, emotions, and urges, a site where the social contradictions of Chinese modernity manifest themselves as particular structures of feeling, and a target of the governing actions of a wide range of social actors. While some of the chapters in this book do focus on particular people and their psyches, others are devoted to the social forces that constrain the psyche. Above all, it is the relation between “Chinese modernity” and “the individual psyche” that is our topic.

To explicate our dislike of the term “individualism” another way, we see some form of tension between “the individual” and “society” as a form of human universal. Human psyches are inevitably related to particular human bodies at the same time that they form in reaction to the social relationships, discourses, and tensions in which they are immersed. To relate terms like individuation or individualism to any sort of modernity is thus misleading in that it implies that tension between individuals and their social environment is in itself something that only recently came about. What changes are the particular social relationships, discourses, and tensions that constitute the social environment and, consequently, the structures of the individual psyche that are immersed therein.4

Problematics of the individual psyche extend into all realms of social life and this volume consequently touches on a diverse array of topics. We have organized the chapters into three thematic sections: the first is titled Creative Expressions and Senses of Self and examines artistic reflections on alienation, freedom, loneliness, and isolation; the second is titled Female Gender and the Relational Psyche; and the third is titled Governing the Individual Psyche. Each of these sections speaks directly to the impossibility of individuation and individualism. The artists analyzed in the first section explore and critique the alienating aspects of Chinese modernity. The chapters of this section demonstrate how various forms of individuality are haunted by specters of their own inadequacy. The section on feminine gender places the tensions between relationality and individualism at the very center of its focus. As a general topic, gender speaks directly to the impossibility of any form of self-sufficient individual. To be gendered is to be partial and divided; the gendered psyche is torn by social and sexual desire and the gendered family member is immersed in social, economic, and psychological relationships of mutual dependency. In the third section, the very idea of governing the individual psyche likewise points to the impossibility
of individualism. If a person’s psyche is being governed by others, how can “individualism” exist? The three sections overlap as several of the essays could have easily fit into more than one section. The essay by Vanessa Fong and her collaborators, for example, can be read as an examination of the manner in which urban mothers govern their daughters while that of Zhiying Ma is quite sensitive to the gendered experiences of schizophrenia patients.

The section on artistic reflection can be read as an extended essay on the powers of industrialized factory work, urbanization, and marketization to alienate people from socially meaningful forms of existence. In this section, Ling-Yun Tang explores the emergence of images of isolated individuals in the work of the generation of Chinese artists born during the 1970s. She emphasizes how their artistic works construct an image of the individual psyche that is overwhelmed by forces beyond his or her control. Emily Wilcox examines how the forces of marketization unleashed during the reform era cause dancers to associate individualized performance with selling out and collective performance with meaningful work. Wanning Sun relates tropes of homelessness in the works of migrant worker poets to the many forms of alienation in their lives.

In contemporary China, as in most times and places, the female psyche in particular is viewed as a site of relationality and the three chapters in the second section explore how female gender roles impact individual psyches. Vanessa Fong and her collaborators focus on how mothers govern and imagine independence for their toddler age daughters and how the place of independence in the mothers’ imaginations and actions is contradicted by the future gender roles they imagine for their daughters. Harriet Evans examines the relationships between grown urban daughters and their mothers and suggests that their concern for relational intimacy in their relationships is in fact a product of the reform era. Hyeon Jung Lee examines the causes of suicide among rural women during the reform era. She concludes that for many married rural women, Chinese modernity has created oppressive, suffocating familial relations and that the pressures of these relationships lead some to suicide.

The third section begins with Delia Lin’s essay on shame as a mechanism of governing the individual psyche. She examines how shame was imagined as a governing mechanism in the Confucian tradition and how this tradition manifests itself in the governing strategies of contemporary social workers, policemen, and parents. Next is Andrew Kipnis’s essay on the private educational sector. He emphasizes that despite the potentially individualized attention
that students in this sector receive, privatized education results in more forceful regimes of homogenization and normalization. The advertising used by businesses in this sector aggressively invokes the hierarchies of social class that result from these regimes of homogenization and normalization. Finally Zhiying Ma’s chapter discusses the treatment of schizophrenia in a psychiatric hospital in southern China. She examines how psychiatric doctors attempt to pharmaceuticalize their patients as asocial beings and how this treatment in fact erases the distinctive (individual) characteristics of the patients.

The sense of irony contained in these essays allows us to emphasize the historical reversals that a more linear understanding of Chinese modernity might miss. Two of the authors demonstrate the importance of powerful and ongoing Chinese traditions of governing the individual psyche. Delia Lin argues that a Confucian tradition of governing through shame remains powerful in contemporary China, while Zhiying Ma describes how modern, Western psychiatry erases rather enhances the individual agency of patients by pharmaceuticalizing their ailments. In resisting this pharmaceuticalization, Chinese patients often turn to traditional Chinese medicine and religion to regain a more socially based sense of personal agency. Harriet Evans demonstrates how the rampant commercialization of the reform era is associated with a rising emphasis on intimate relationality (rather than individualism) among urban mothers and daughters. Emily Wilcox argues that institutional, subjective, and affective elements of the Maoist era remain important in the assertions of selfhood and the search for professional meaningfulness by Chinese dancers today. For all of these authors, it is not the arrival of a Western, capitalist modernity alone that explains the structures of feeling around the individual psyche in contemporary China. Legacies of China’s premodern and socialist modernity remain important and China’s capitalist modernity leads not only to individuation.

Further, the sense of reversal extends to criticizing the implicit linearity of some of the classic Western theories of modernity as well. In exploring patterns of female suicide in rural China, Hyeon Jung Lee notes how these patterns diverge from the typical social science imagination of suicide in the West. But this divergence arises only because of the reliance of contemporary social science on Durkheim’s assertion that modern suicide was a result of social anomie and that anomic suicides have been more closely associated with men than women. Durkheim purposefully ignored more traditional forms of suicide and thus, far from being anomalous, patterns of suicide in rural China today have many lessons for how social scientists
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