

Review: Understanding the Historical Coordinates of Chinese Modernisation

The current historical conjuncture is characterised by multiple crises and conflagrations, from the fratricidal war between Russia and Ukraine, to the resistance of Francophone Africa against neocolonialism, to the struggles waged by millions of people to access basic necessities such as food and housing even in supposedly wealthy countries like the United States. In the epistemology of Lu Xinyu – a professor in the School of Communication at East China Normal University – this conjuncture is shaped by the ongoing exploration of paths to modernisation that began in the second half of the 19th century and spanned the long 20th century. Even though her book *Neoliberalism or Neocollective Rural China* announces China as the central object of study, Lu's real concern is the path of modernisation of the entire world, and particularly that of the Global South.¹

From Lu's perspective, the foremost issue in the path to modernisation is the agrarian question: how can agriculture modernise while maintaining and developing the collective structure of rural areas, and what should happen to the peasantry in the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation? From the second half of the 19th century, three distinct paths to modernisation can be identified. First, in the US, the Civil War (1861–1865) forcibly displaced the agrarian population – a large portion of whom were descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas – from the land and cast them into cities, a situation that contributed to vast inequality and laid the groundwork for social movements like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the 2013 Black Lives Matter protests. Second, countries like Germany and Japan could not easily dispose of their agricultural population as the US did, so they chose military expansion, which led to two World Wars and a Cold War, the latter of which is still ongoing in many ways. The third path to modernisation is that of the Soviet Union's pioneering communist revolution and worker-peasant alliance, which was eventually suffocated by the Cold War but continues in spirit in the form of the Chinese Revolution, which it inspired. Debates around these typologies of modernisation help establish a historical coordinate to both clarify the past and chart a path for the future.

Ideology and Class Struggle in China

There is a running joke in China that the country's international image is 'hated by both the left and the right'. The right despises China for being communist, while the left despises it for being capitalist. A simple explanation for this contradiction is the fact that class struggle within China has never ended. In the realm of ideology and culture, a focal point of this struggle is the interpretation of the significance of the Chinese Revolution for the peasantry. Did the revolution, led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), truly liberate peasants, or did it hinder their natural progression into modernisation and urbanisation within a market-oriented civil society? Is the decline of rural areas the original driving force of the revolution, or is it its

original sin? As suggested by the book's title, is the future of China's countryside to be defined by neoliberalism or by a revival of collectivism within the context of modernisation?

The main body of Lu's book originates from an eight-year (2003–2011) debate between her and Qin Hui, a Chinese liberal intellectual and historian who is currently an adjunct professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. For readers outside China, it is important to note that the Lu–Qin debate was not merely an intellectual exercise taking place in the ivory tower of academia. Rather, this debate reflects a broader public discourse about the direction of China's reform and opening up process. The first ten years of the 21st century, when the Lu–Qin debate took place, were a critical period for China and the CPC. In 2022, *Qiusbi*, the official journal of the CPC Central Committee, published an article summarising the decade since the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012. This era was described as the moment of 'stemming a raging tide from sweeping everything away and holding up a building from falling down'.² Figuratively, this meant reversing a looming crisis and propping up a tottering country without delay.

Since the 1980s, Qin has made numerous analyses of historical and social formations in his writings, comparing the 'despotic' social structures of rural Guanzhong in the Shaanxi province during the Ming and Qing dynasties to the 'democratic' city-state of ancient Athens. His overarching argument is that the October Revolution was backward and produced a Soviet government with features of oriental despotism.³ The ultimate aim of this argument is to challenge the legitimacy of the CPC's 'despotic empire'.⁴ Qin Hui's idealised depiction of a beautiful Greek city-state that is decentralised and detached from the duty to provide public infrastructure and services belies the fact that such states were dependent on the blood, sweat, and unpaid labour of slaves from the silver mines of Laurion. This mythology parallels the idealised neoliberal image of the US and its 'big houses, big pickup trucks, and big steaks', an image popularly used by Chinese netizens, which hides an underbelly of imperialism and institutional racism.

In 2013, Qin penned an article mocking Xi Jinping's appeal to learn from the Soviet Union's experience of collapse and the dangers of historical nihilism.⁵ The liberal intellectuals Qin represented were self-assured that China's red flag was about to change colour. They genuinely believed that liberal reforms, similar to those in the Soviet Union, were the path that China should follow. A key feature of this path was to intellectually and ideologically undermine the legitimacy of the Chinese Revolution and portray the CPC as a repressive regime stifling socio-economic vitality and paving the road to serfdom.

To address Qin's assertions, Lu has conducted thorough historical research that spans thousands of years and encompasses Eurasia and the Americas. In her book, Lu aptly points out that the entry of the neoliberal system into China alongside the reform and opening-up process in the late 1970s transformed millions of rural peasants into migrant workers in the cities. The neoliberal vision for China's rural areas mirrored their global proposals: the privatisation of land (so it could be seized by big capital) and the free movement of agricultural populations (so that landless peasants could become cheap labour in the cities). Qin's provocative proposal to 'grant the right to build slums for the urban poor' is precisely the policy direction that Lu loudly warns China to avoid.⁶

All history is contemporary history, and every debate about history reflects contemporary politics. While foreign observers often believe that China is a hive mind, the debate recorded in this book vividly captures

how open and intense the debates within China's academic and intellectual circles can be and how closely they are related to real-world political struggles.

The Global South's March Towards Modernisation

The image of 'iron and fire' appears repeatedly in Lu's monograph. In her view, the great struggle over the future of human modernisation must ultimately aim to unite the seven billion people of the Global South to embark on a joint path of modernisation. This great struggle will involve both 'iron' (economic development) and 'fire' (armed revolution). Over the past decade, Lu has increasingly focused on issues related to rural revitalisation and reorganisation in China. The final chapter of her book discusses her fieldwork from the long-impoverished and near-empty Tangyue Village in Guizhou Province, to the comprehensive peasant association of Pu-Han Community in Shaanxi Province, which covers 43 villages, to the financial cooperative experiment in Haotang Village in Henan Province.

Lu is not just conducting academic research but actively seeking feasible paths for rural reorganisation in China. She is particularly concerned with two practical economic issues. First, what mechanisms can ensure that rural economic development becomes a self-sustaining process, propelled by endogenous motivations and resources? Second, how to ensure the survival of collective economies within the framework of a market economy? It is therefore easy for scholars from the Global South to understand why she always begins her visits to rural villages by asking about the status of local collective economies. This focus aligns with her theoretical research on Russia's pre-revolutionary land issues and Stolypin's agrarian reforms. It must be said that Lu's in-depth studies of the land issue in Russia and the Soviet Union, despite her background in Chinese language and literature and in the aesthetics of literature and art, are truly remarkable.

Lu argues that China's internal ideological debates reflect an international struggle and existential battle against Western hegemonic ideology. When President Xi Jinping proposed that 'Global South countries marching together toward modernisation is monumental in world history and unprecedented in human civilisation', the significance of this battle became even more evident.⁷ The Global South, as the 'rural' part of the world capitalist system, shares a destiny and path closely connected with China's rural areas. Just as soybean plantations squeeze out landless farmers in Brazil, so too are China's soybean farmers crushed by international big capital – both are victims of the world capitalist system.

In recent years, Lu has been involved in initiatives such as the Global South Academic Forum and the establishment of research bases in rural areas such as Rongjiang in Guizhou Province, Ganzhou in Jiangxi Province, and Xiong'an in Hebei Province. These initiatives are intended to communicate China's stories of poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation to the outside world in general and the Global South in particular. They attempt to tell the story of struggles in rural China in more vivid and multidimensional ways, taking into account the complex and rich debates taking place in the country. In this context, *Neoliberalism or Neocollective Rural China* is also an invitation to scholars from China and the Global South to exchange experiences and engage in deeper debate on the agrarian question and the path to modernisation.

Notes

¹ Lu Xinyu, *Neoliberalism or Neocollective Rural China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

² Jiang Jinquan, 'The Great Transformations of the Decade in the New Era' [新时代十年的伟大变革], *Qiushi*, no. 22 (2022).

³ Editor's note: The trope of oriental despotism derives from the work of German-US historian, and Marxist turned anti-communist, Karl August Wittfogel. For more, read: Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (Yale University Press, 1957).

⁴ Qin Hui, 'Moving Away from the Imperial Regime' [走出帝制：从晚清到民国的历史回望] (Qunyan Press, 2015).

⁵ Qin Hui, 'The Last Days of the Soviet Communist Party: Still One True "Man"' [苏共末日：尚有一人是“男儿”], *The Economic Observer*, 27 March 2013.

⁶ Jiang Qian, 'Tsinghua University Professor Qin Hui Proposes Shenzhen Take the Lead in Establishing Slums' [清华大学教授秦晖建议深圳率先兴建贫民区], *Southern Metropolis Daily* [南方都市报], 14 April 2008.

⁷ Xi Jinping, 'Combining the Great Strength of the Global South to Build Together a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind', Ministry of Foreign Affairs the People's Republic of China, 24 October 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202410/t20241024_11515589.html.



Xiong Jie

Xiong Jie (熊节) is the director of the Global South Research Centre at the International Communication Research Institute of East China Normal University and a researcher at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. His current research focuses on the modernisation and digitisation of the Global South. He received his MBA degree from the University of Liverpool.