

Preface

Chen Hon Fai's exploration of the growth and concerns of the study societies of the late Qing period is a welcome addition to the literature on the historical sociology of modern China. The background, motivations and outputs of the young men and women who with enormous enthusiasm and creativity came together in these societies, during a pivotal period of China's history, in their endeavour to construct an alternative future for a civilization disrupted by both foreign intervention and a depleted and divided Qing court, is a rich and fascinating subject. In addition, an awareness of these study societies is essential for a sense of the modernizing and revolutionary trajectory of Chinese history from the late nineteenth century to the present time. Chen's capable treatment of this important topic is as thoughtful and diverse as his material, comprised of archival sources and sociological models and theories deftly applied. Indeed, not only is our understanding of the study societies and the China to which they belonged advanced through this work but the competence and scope of sociological thought is also expanded in the course of this book.

The importance of the work before us is in the attention it draws to the late-Qing study societies themselves, which have largely been neglected

by scholars. But as the precursors of a cultural and political transformation that arguably culminated in the New Culture movement of the early Republican period these societies were pivotal in the refashioning of China at the time, initiating a process of change that has occupied the twentieth century and continues still. In part inspired and even sponsored by such notable reformers as Kang Youwei the study societies emerged in a number of cities and towns, composed of young people who saw the limitations of the conventions of Qing China and through the prism of foreign knowledge, borrowed not only from the West but also Japan, set about remaking the world in which they lived. The study societies were composed of “intellectual entrepreneurs,” as Xiaoyong Qi (2014) calls them, agents of change who combine “elements from both foreign and domestic contexts, [in making] something that had not previously existed and which can operate as a newly introduced knowledge only after the resistance of the established intellectual framework is overcome” (Qi 2013: 346–47). This combination of constructive and deconstructive intellectual engagements borrowed from diverse sources and fashioned anew, in order to achieve political, social and cultural change, was a characteristic of the study societies that this book explores in detail, and in doing so reveals the multiplicity of their activities and outputs.

The themes taken up by the late-Qing study societies are aptly captured in the title of this work, *Civilizing the Chinese, Competing with the West*, but the particular topics these societies addressed, as Chen shows, were remarkably diverse. The Confucianism of the literati and the Qing court was at this time beginning to be seen as a hindrance to China’s future development, but the approach of the time was not necessarily to simply reject Confucianism but to transform it in various ways (Barbalet 2016). A number of the study societies were instrumental in attempting to realize the ideal of a Confucian church, paralleling a Western religious form that was seen by many Chinese to be a source of the power of the foreign forces that imposed themselves on China. Other study societies, though, saw Confucianism not as a religious but as a moral and cultural force, possibly representing a nation rather than a congregation. Indeed, the transformation of China—from a civilizational empire at the centre of the

world to one nation among many others—was achieved in large measure through the efforts of the study societies to redefine the political and cultural vocabulary of the time, including the construction of the modern notion of “society” comprising a common people with a common destiny. The impossibility of such a notion from the perspective of the Qing court was in the latter’s hierarchical structure and authority, and therefore the predominant compelling prerogative of the court itself against and over “the four hundred million people” of late-Qing China. All of this and much more is explored by Chen in his discussion below.

A constant theme of Chen’s account, illuminatingly illustrated through careful analysis of case material, is the complexity of the transformation of Qing China realized through the efforts of the study societies and the ambiguity of the context in which they operated. Two examples will be sufficient to make the point. First is the matter of the so-called “religious cases.” These related to the conflict between local Chinese on the one hand and Christian missionaries and their followers on the other, often climaxing in violent attacks on missionaries and converts orchestrated by local elites in defense of Confucian ethics against Western encroachments. These developments attracted the attention and engaged the efforts of study societies, which were largely in agreement with the underlying anti-Western animus of these movements but opposed to their proximate motive and in fundamental disagreement with the stratagem of violent confrontation. A second example is the opportunities afforded to the study groups for protection from Qing censorship and persecution provided by the foreign concessions, enclaves of foreign imperial extra-territoriality within China, which undermined China’s unity and composure. The study societies therefore had an unsettlingly ambiguous relationship with the foreign concessions: the study societies were uniformly committed to the ultimate expulsion of the foreign presence because of its interference in Chinese affairs, but tactically drew on the liberal environment provided by the Shanghai foreign concession in particular as a sanctuary from official Qing repression.

The documentary evidence concerning the study societies provided by Chen’s analysis of their ideas and activities sits in a sociological discourse

that not only enriches our understanding of the study societies and the social and historical context they occupied but at the same time extends the meaning of the sociological concepts drawn upon in this account. For instance, in Chapter 2 Chen applies to the activities of the study societies the notion of “social imaginary” developed by Charles Taylor (2004). This is done in order to identify the culturally expansive practices of the study societies that in effect configured future possibilities for China at a time when it was constrained by both tradition and foreign incursion. In its application to the late-Qing study societies the notion of social imaginary here takes on a dimension that it lacks in Taylor’s own exposition. The developments referred to in the discussion of this book as social imaginaries include such things as cultural formation and elaboration, institution building and related practices. These diverse phenomena, as imaginaries, relate to not-yet-completed but future-anticipating prospects which operate in terms not of idealization but contention and constraint, the elaboration and applications of available resources, alliance formations of various sorts—including, on occasion, alliances with foreign missionaries—and so on. A similar creative inflection of a well-known sociological idea occurs when Norbert Elias’ (1994) notion of the “civilizing process” is applied in Chapter 7 to the historical case of Qing China rather than to France or Germany with which the notion is almost always associated. Chen’s account of the nature and development of the Qing state through the Eliasian prism is insightful in revealing the contours and limits of Qing state development.

The monograph before us is important in a number of different ways. As a work of historical scholarship it brings to life, through a detailed narrative, a largely forgotten and generally ignored historical entity that is the late-Qing study societies; in doing so these latter are provided with a well-crafted literary representation they had hitherto lacked. Second, as a work of sociological theorization, this book creatively applies and therefore expands the competence of an array of concepts and notions that acquire new meaning and persuasive power in Chen’s use of them in treating the *fin de siècle* of the last Chinese dynasty and, in the study societies, one of the significant instruments of both the demise and the regeneration of

China as a proto-nation and state. Thirdly, in discussing the past, this book provides a guide for understanding the present. This is because the concerns of the late-Qing study societies for civilization and society, terms to which they gave a characteristically new meaning, can be related to subsequent developments connected with both Confucian religion and military citizenship, aspects of the study societies' discernment discussed by Chen with much lucidity. Of course, neither Confucian religion nor military citizenship survived the subsequent New Culture and May Fourth movements. And yet, the present-day acceptance of New Confucianism and Confucian "spirituality" among intellectuals in greater China, including the People's Republic, and the presence of muscular nationalism in mainland China together with the rise of confrontational localism in Hong Kong and Taiwan indicate that the broad categories of "Confucian religion" on the one hand and "military citizenship" on the other, although not of the late-Qing form, remain relevant today as implicit in cultural and political discourses and practices.

Civilizing the Chinese, Competing with the West provides not only a compelling discussion of China's recent past but in doing so this book helps us to understand the present. Chen Hon Fai has provided a great service to all who are interested in the formative period of modern Chinese history that was the late-Qing. He has at the same time revealed to his readers the intriguing roots of Chinese modernity in the concerns and practices of the study societies of that period. All of this is achieved through a clearly developed exposition of sociological discourse in which established ideas become enriched through their application to this Chinese case. Here indeed is theorizing that brings to life the activities of the study societies in their formation of a new Chinese civilization and society. This is indeed an engaging book, the result of deep scholarship, presented in an accessible style informed by insightful reflection on primary sources.

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