

Teaching “What is ‘Modern’”?

Bram Hubbell
Liberating Narratives

Why Teach “What Is Modern?”

- World History from a global perspective
- The students in our classrooms and the histories we teach
- Teaching historical thinking skills

AFE

WHAT IS MODERN?

INTRO

"MODERN"? ▾

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION ▾

NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS ▾

MODERN CHINA ▾

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS ▾

Introduction

New Directions in World History, 1500-Present

Until about twenty years ago, the studies of most historians on different parts of the world were largely kept separate. This made it possible for us to think that the making of the modern world was principally a European story, the story of Europeans going out and exploring the rest of the world. We have understood the dynamism and the construction of the modern world to be the product of European motives, efforts, and intentions.

The Eurocentric View of History [VIDEO]

[Read Video Transcript](#)



01:58

In the last twenty years, people working on other parts of the world—East Asia being a crucial area—have begun to recognize that the dynamics that take place in their parts of the world have certain similarities to those that take place in Europe. And it is from those initial insights of specialists that we begin to see in the last decade the integration of that knowledge with the knowledge about European history to produce a more informed world history.

[Read an excerpt from the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on China's place in world history in the last millenium, 1000-2000.](#)

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "MODERN"?

RETHINKING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

CHINA AND EUROPE: THE NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1500-1800

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1780-1937

CHINA ACHIEVES A MODERN STATE

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS

- Teachers Guide
- Lesson Plans
- Classroom Resources
- Bibliography

ABOUT

Making Geographical Comparisons

- The videos
- Comparing China and Europe
- Comparing part of China with Britain



Comparing Europe with China [VIDEO]

[Read Video Transcript](#)



Causation and the Development of Global Trade

- Early modern global trade
- The silver trade

AFE

WHAT IS MODERN?

INTRO

"MODERN"? ▾

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION ▾

NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS ▾

MODERN CHINA ▾

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS ▾

China and Europe: 1500-1800

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "MODERN"?

THE SILK ROAD

THE MARCH OF THE WEST

THE EAST ASIAN WORLD

THE EUROPEAN WORLD

THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA

THE RIVALRY BETWEEN EUROPE AND CHINA

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABOUT

Standard prices come from lists so common in China that land contracts normally had a price in copper or some local medium, and then in a little handwritten note on the side next to the standard price, they told you how much that was in Spanish or Mexican pesos. It was just a part of life there.

Causation and Industrialization

AFE

WHAT IS MODERN?

INTRO

"MODERN"? ▾

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION ▾

NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS ▾

MODERN CHINA ▾

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS ▾

China and Europe: 1780-1937

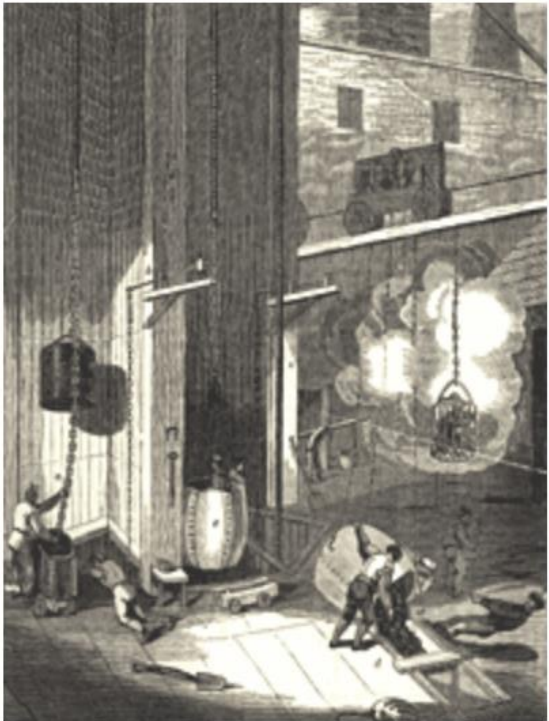
What Happened?

Ecological Differences

Now, an obvious question arises: Why don't these similarities last? We know that they don't. Between 1750 and 1900, European production and living standards were transformed, while Chinese non-grain consumption actually seemed to decline a bit. Nineteen hundred figures for cloth and sugar, for instance, come out below even my lower-bound estimates for 1750. Why would that be? What happened?

Much of the difference was ecological, but not in the simple sense that population pressure produced any more serious problems within Chinese cores than in core areas of Europe. That view— that there were simply too many people in China, et cetera—is a standard warhorse of the literature.

But at least for the most advanced regions of China, the story doesn't seem to hold. And the most advanced regions were also the most densely populated. I've reconstructed just for one example, nitrogen fluxes from dry farming areas of North China and England. Nitrogen is the limiting nutrient in most early modern farming, and fortunately it's also somewhat easier to reconstruct what happens with that than with most other nutrients.



Workers at the mouth of an English coal pit, early nineteenth century.
Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "MODERN"?

RETHINKING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

CHINA AND EUROPE: THE NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1500-1800

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1780-1937

- The Revolution Explained
- What Happened?
- Differential Growth

CHINA ACHIEVES A MODERN STATE

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS

- Teachers Guide
- Lesson Plans
- Classroom Resources
- Bibliography

ABOUT

- The causes of the Industrial Revolution
- Methods versus motives

Adaption and Continuity in China

- Why did China not industrialize?
- How did the Chinese respond to the economic changes of the nineteenth century?

AFE

WHAT IS MODERN?

INTRO

"MODERN"? ▾

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION ▾

NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS ▾

MODERN CHINA ▾

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS ▾

ABOUT ▾

China and Europe: 1780-1937

Differential Growth

China's Peripheries Decline

Meanwhile, in at least some of the Chinese hinterlands, the standard of living may still have been creeping up a bit, as handicrafts spread. But it was far short of Yangzi delta standards, and it now had much more weight in Chinese aggregates, causing the aggregates to sink. And ecologically, things did worsen in nineteenth-century China. But interestingly, not so much in the densely populated cores that you might have thought would be the most stressed areas, but in peripheral areas.

The northwest and southwest were seriously over-logged. Excessive reclamation in the middle Yangzi was increasing its vulnerability to flooding. And the water table fell sharply in the non-monsoonal hinterlands of the north and west, as their populations grew.

Late-eighteenth-century reports began noting that wells needed to be re-dug to make them deeper, a good sign of a falling water table. And by the early twentieth century, lake areas in these regions had shrunk dramatically.

The Asian Trade Boom

I think most people know that the mid-nineteenth century is a period of considerable trauma and upheaval in East and Southeast Asia with the "opening" of Japan and later Korea, the French conquest of Indochina, and so on. And this is probably truest of all in China, where the mounting environmental problems we just discussed combine with a serious decline in the government's



INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "MODERN"?

RETHINKING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

CHINA AND EUROPE: THE NEW UNITS OF ANALYSIS

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1500-1800

CHINA AND EUROPE: 1780-1937

- The Revolution Explained
- What Happened?
- Differential Growth

CHINA ACHIEVES A MODERN STATE

CONCLUSION

FOR TEACHERS

- Teachers Guide
- Lesson Plans
- Classroom Resources
- Bibliography

ABOUT