We need to find what we are not looking for

The Master Class on “Comparative Intellectual Histories of the Early Modern World” was held at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden in May-June, 2006. The idea of a master class – assembling a team of scholars to discuss recent advances in a field with doctoral and postdoctoral students – is the brain child of IIAS’s former director, Wim Stokhof, and I express my thanks to him for his vision and energy in making this intellectual experiment possible.

I say experiment because none of the participants, the instructors included, had ever engaged in this kind of comparative intellectual-historical conversation. As Michael Cook confessed, although he works with Benjamin Elman in the very same building at Princeton University, the two had never previously exchanged ideas on problems shared across their regions. It was just this sort of non-communication – fallout from the division of the world of knowledge into studies of areas – that the class was designed in part to address.

To be sure, knowledge always begins in specific places, and one of our aims was to share new knowledge about ideas and intellectual practices in the places we study. But more crucial and challenging was it to address the three critical problems embedded in the title to the class, problems that are either only now coming under study, or are understudied, or even unstudied:

• What sense does it make to speak of early modernity in the sphere of mental life outside the early modern West—that is, in Asia in the several centuries preceding European expansion? What problems do we face in defining such modernity? Is ‘early modernity’ a useful concept in writing the history of Asian thought?

• What are the special tasks, methods, or theoretical commitments that constitute intellectual history as a separate and valid form of knowledge? Does the intellectual history of early-modern Asia have tasks, methods or theoretical commitments that differentiate it from the study of intellectual history as developed from European materials? Is there an unacknowledged link between the events of European intellectual history and what are seen as ‘general’ methods of intellectual history?

• What are the aims and methods of a comparative intellectual history of the early modern world? How do we do it, and what precisely are we trying to discover when we do do it?

I can’t address all these questions – the assembled essays here collectively do so in their different ways – but will offer only a summary of my introductory remarks. I can be relatively brief about ‘early modernity’ and ‘intellectual history’ since our specific challenge was coming to terms with the problem of comparativism.

The uses and abuses of ‘early modernity’

Early modernity has been a much disputed topic of conversation among scholars of Asia for the past decade, both regionalists and generalists. Many object to the apparent teleology of the idea, committing us as it is supposed to do to some inevitable developmental goal (so Randolph Starn). Of course,
our inquiry is performe teleological in the same sense as the older historiography, which is the story just because we concentrate on the beginning – indeed, we wouldn’t even know where to begin the story if we didn’t know how it has ended because we wouldn’t know what the story was. Others object that many so-called early modernities never became full modernities, nor did they contribute to modernisation in western modernisation. But what if modernisation short-circuited other processes of transformation? No gift, therefore, that the present has come out, and we want to know how and why it has.

Few deny that over the three centuries up to 1800 Eurasia as a whole witnessed unprecedented developments: the opening of the East to the Atlantic; the development of the first time in history, and of networks of trade and commodity-production for newly global markets; spectacular demographic growth; the growth of fixed cities; the diffusion of new technologies (gunpowder, printing) and crops from the New World; the growth of nationalism; the diffusion of what Ernst Bloch saw as modernity’s constitutive ‘Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen’ ('simultaneity of things that are non-simultaneous') – would be as important as a ‘negative’ outcome, say, of knowing why people may wish to preserve forms of knowledge in the face of changing objects of knowledge no less than in knowing why they may be prepared to change them.

The life and death of intellectual history

Probably no subfield of the discipline of history has experienced a more precipitous decline in the past generation than intellectual history. The retreat from intellectual history into social history seems widely symptomatic of a broader trend. (In Indian studies intellectual history never really existed as a theorised scholarly practice, so there was nothing to retreat from.) Comparative intellectual history has fared even worse – in fact, it is hard to claim the practice even exists in any acceptable, historical form (comparisons of Shankara and Heidegger, for example, in this issue of the journal, are intellectual history). Notwithstanding the relative indifference toward it, intellectual history and what I will suggest is the sui generis intellectual history, constitute an important new horizon on the terrain of early modern Eurasian history and, in my view, are the crucial elements of the dominant form of modernity – coloni- al, capitalist, western – achieved global prominence. We might set out to write a global history of ‘early modern’ intellectual history, to say nothing of demonstrating its isomorphism. We might set out to write a global history of ‘early modern’ intellectual history, to say nothing of demonstrating its isomorphism. This linkage brings intellectual history closer to Reinhart Koselleck’s argument for the continuous place of compar- ative practice, but no models should be found everywhere literate culture itself is found. Our comparative intellectual history posits the importance of synchrony among cases but makes no prior claims that synchrony entails symmetry; in fact, asymmetries are as essential as synchronicities. How comparable forms of thought in time, change differently, or do not change at all, and why they do or do not change, is what historical inquiry seeks to understand. Not only is chronology central to our com- parative practice, but no models should be held to be universal, as instances of necessary regularities. On the contrary, what we want is comparison without hegemony.

It is vitally important that the synchroni- ty-grounding comparative history contain no necessary regularities. The historian making a comparison must make no assumption of unidirectional change and do not look for it; make no assumption of a world system of histories. And as the historian making a comparison participated, as some believe was the case with the world system of capitalism, indeed, economic and intellectual history can be a form of homomorphism. We might set out to write a history of early modern capitalism but it would be wrong-headed to set out to write a history of early modern capitalism or of early modern thought as if we knew in advance what that singular entity was. And if the descriptor ‘early modern’ was not just a terminological device, and not a conceptual mark. This is precisely the defi-
nitional trap that we saw lies in wait. Avoiding it and its hegemony means avoiding the one model of modernity that chanced to succeed; it means redefining modernity so that it is not about fossil fuels, parliamentary government, and socialism, but a completely open category waiting to be filled with local content generated by empirical work.

When one compares the intellectual histories of the early modern world, what is it precisely that we want to know or do? Validate a hypothesis over N cases? Develop causal accounts of big structures and processes? Distinguishate cases? The first is the goal of comparative history; the second, the goal of processual history. The most effective comparative intellectual histories are going to be of the last type, which (as Peter Baldwin explains) ignores generalisation and seeks to capture similarities and differences across a limited number of instances in order to understand the cases under discussion, to isolate from the incidental what is ‘archetypally’ present, less likely, what is ‘causal’. The world that intellectuals across the globe inhabited and sought to know changed indubitably and radically in the period standardly called early modern. The master class participants want to know how those intellectuals responded, what their responses might compare with each other in different places, how similarly or dissimilarly their responses transformed the great intellectual traditions to which they were heir. The question to ask is not: ‘How modern is it?’ – that’s the hegemonic comparison we need to consciously bring to the table and examine critically. The question to ask instead is whether intellectual modernity may have had different characteristics and histories in different parts of the world, including the history of kaozheng xue, ‘evidential scholarship’, in China, of sixiqi, ‘renaissance’, and nahu, ‘verification’, in the Middle East, and of ‘newness’, narsita, in India; and more, whether in those histories possibilities for a modernity different from the capitalist variety may once have been contained.

Suggestions for Further Reading


B Y 1650 leading Chinese literati and decisively broken with the orthodoxy entrenched in official life and tipped the balance in favour of a ‘search for evidence’ as the key to understanding China’s past. Like Renaissance Latin philologists, Chinese philologists exposed inconsistencies in contemporary beliefs. They were also prototypes of the modern philologist as moral reformer – radical conservatives who attacked the present in the name of the past. As scholarly iconoclasts they hoped to locate a timeless order in and to the classical tradition.

Most historians treat late imperial China, 1400-1900, as a time of fading and decay. Indeed, viewed backwards from the Opium War (1839-1842) and Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), events before 1800 appear to have left China unprepared for modernity. But the 17th and 18th centuries can be considered not only as a ‘late imperial’ prelude to the end of traditional China, but as an ‘early modern’ harbinger of things to come.