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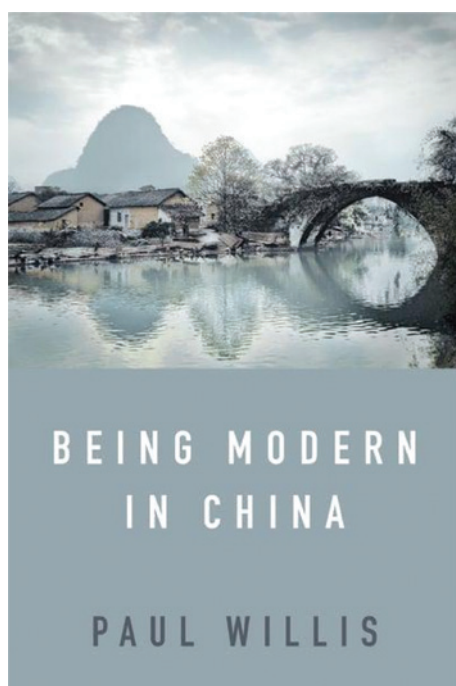
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Book review

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Being Modern in China: A Western cultural analysis of modernity, tradition and schooling in China today,
by Paul Willis

Cambridge: Polity Press; 2019; 240 pp.; ISBNs: 978-1-50953-831-7 (pbk);
978-1-50953-830-0 (hbk); 978-1-50953-832-4 (ebk)



This book gives a fascinating view on the relationship between Chinese modernity, tradition and school education. It is addressed to scholars who have an interest in contemporary Chinese culture, since the author provides an elaborate cultural analysis of Chinese modernity and school culture. Paul Willis used to work at Beijing Normal University, and the ethnographic data of this book are based on his academic visits to Chinese schools and reading diaries provided by his students. For that matter, this book is also for researchers in the field of school education, and its analytical strategy is helpful to scholars in the field of cultural sociology.

Since the 1980s, China has become the world's second-largest economy. Especially in the past decade, despite economic growth decelerating, China's gross domestic product has increased by more than 6.5 per cent every year (NBS, 2019). This economic growth has simultaneously lifted more than 600 million people out of poverty and seen half of the Chinese population urbanized (Li *et al.*, 2016). However, in the process of rapid economic development, many challenges have attracted the

attention of sociologists. What is the relationship between Chinese tradition and modernity? What role does school education play in Chinese modernization? By examining the aspects of Chinese society that have changed and remained the same during modernization, Paul Willis's book provides some answers to these questions.

The book consists of 13 chapters. In addition to the Introduction (Chapter 1), the main structure of the book is made up of four parts. In Chapter 1, the author introduces the theoretical basis and his observations of Chinese society. To better understand the influence of modernity in China, the author suggests 'the symbolic order' to provide a cultural framework to examine how modernity constructs the meaning and identity of individuals and groups today.

The first part (Chapters 2–4) illustrates three arrows of modernity: 'the worship of the glorified city; devotion to consumerism and the cultural commodity; and fixation with the smartphone and the internet' (24). All of these represent the changing aspects of Chinese culture within modernization, and they constitute modernity's symbolic order. The author emphasizes that 'development' means the 'rich life', or the 'glorified future' in the Chinese context. It is the pursuit of development that has driven the modernization of China in the past forty years (28). In the second part (Chapters 5–7), the author first elaborates how the three arrows constitute the symbolic order in the education system, and second the relationship and conflict between the symbolic order of education and that of different groups. School education, especially *Gaokao* (the college entrance examination), not only retains the competition and selective pressures from the traditional civil service entrance examination, but also connects with modernity, providing a path for students to realize the dream of their 'glorified future'.

However, Willis argues that school education cannot promise this 'glorified future' to all students. Students' academic performances shape different routes and meanings to this modernity, as passing the examination distinguishes *Gaokao*-routers (G-routers) from non-*Gaokao*-routers (non-G-routers). In the third part (Chapters 8–9), the author uses ethnographic data to explore the two different experiences of modernity of these groups. By analysing diaries written by his students, the author portrays the different attitudes of these groups of students towards school education and modernity. For the G-routers, modernity means the dream of the future that needs to be realized through school education. In order to realize this dream, they choose to do everything they can to improve their score before *Gaokao* (109–17). By contrast, the non-G-routers cannot achieve their dream of modernity through school education, so they give up their academic career and enjoy more immediate pleasures, just as 'the lads' did (124–5) in the author's classic book *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 2016). The fourth part (Chapters 10–13) offers a deep portrayal of Chinese informal culture, the alternative perspective of the non-G-routers, shaped by modernity and school education. By analysing ethnographic data, the author successfully suggests how people with informal school experience proclaim their demands for dignity and autonomy in the face of a changing China.

I found two particularly important contributions in this book. First, the local meaning of modernity in China is reflected in the complex relationship between tradition and modernity. On the one hand, modernity in China means a lifestyle of complete progress, breaking with tradition to be oriented to the glorified future, while tradition is treated as backwardness. On the other hand, those aspects of tradition that adapt to consumerism are still retained and reshaped, and still influence people's identity and experience during modernization, especially in school education. This local meaning is different from the experience of the UK and the USA (24), where tradition is

treated as a perspective for critically analysing modernity, rather than as a measure of how far development has progressed. Second, taking whether students pass *Gaokao* as the distinction, school education has shaped two types of modern experience for different student groups. G-routers postpone the enjoyment of modern life in order to prepare for passing *Gaokao* for their ideal glorified future. However, such sacrifice may cause them to lose their taste for a modern lifestyle, as their delay of enjoyment prevents them from gaining sensuous gratification and material satisfaction. Therefore, they may fail to enjoy modernity. On the contrary, the non-G-routers choose the immediate enjoyment of a modern lifestyle. They may be failing in terms of academic performance, but they create a special informal culture, and they find specific ways to achieve their glorified future through the experience of unsuccessful school education.

There are, however, some aspects that could have been better analysed. For example, the selection of some ethnographic data does not match the theme of the study. The author attempts to portray the desire of students from a rural background to experience modernity in the metropolis. However, Dorothy's reading diary, which is cited repeatedly, suggests that its author was not a student from a rural background. Since she could easily get help from a doctoral student through her family capital when she was preparing the 'autonomous enrolment of universities' (111), it is difficult to conceive that her family background is in a rural context, far from urban culture. Therefore, it is questionable to what extent her experience can represent that of rural students.

In addition, the author regards the realization of 'the city dreams' as a call for internal migrants to experience modernity (81). However, he does not discuss whether or not their living conditions in cities meet their expectations of the 'glorified future'. Ironically, both the tragic schooling experiences of second-generation migrants (92–5) and the terrible living conditions of migrant workers (146–9) indicate that the living pressures facing informal groups, or the non-G-routers, do not meet their expectations of the 'glorified future'. The integration of those groups into the city deserves more discussion.

To sum up, Paul Willis brilliantly explains the relationship between Chinese modernity, tradition and school education. His cultural analysis and ethnographic data constitute an in-depth insight into Chinese modernity. *Being Modern in China* is a well-organized book that will contribute to the field of education and sociology. Scholars in these research areas, especially those interested in Chinese school education and social migration, will greatly benefit from reading this book.

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