

Hui Wang

Living in an Intellectual Village



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On the evening of my last day in Berlin, I went to the Wissenschaftskolleg to check my mail. Everybody had gone. In the emptiness, it suddenly came to me that, before I came to Berlin, a former Fellow described to me the life at Wiko as living in an international intellectual village. After my one-year stay, I found that I like the image of Wiko as a village: lake, forest, villagers, kids, intimate relationships, the regular ritual practice (Colloquium on the morning of every Tuesday), cooking, singing, playing ping-pong, etc. Of course, this is an international intellectual village: Villagers came from different countries and different disciplines and formed different groups according to their own interests: bat group, empire group, globalization group, etc.

As a shifting target between the empire group and the globalization group, I found many overlaps and interactions between the historical studies on empires and the social scientists' survey of globalization. The overlaps and interactions between the two groups became so obvious when one Fellow put the book titled *Empire* on the table of the globalization group for discussion and another gathering of the empire group began to discuss the global interactions in the so-called early modern period from the different perspectives of China, Persia, South America, and India.

The empire group was composed of historians who were working on the histories of Indian, China, South America, Germany, Russia, and so on and so forth. All of them were inclined to find alternative perspectives to go beyond the framework of national history. I learned a lot from our discussions and readings concerning the Mogul empire, Qing empire, the Spanish empire, and the German *Reich*, which help us to rethink how much our knowledge about histories was shaped by the self-assertive ideas of the 19th-century nation-state as a natural subject of history and modernity.

These discussions were directly relevant to my own project on Qing intellectual history. In the study of Chinese history, historians often face the following questions: What is China's "modernity"? How did it arise? What were its characteristics and driving forces? The most influential answers to these questions can be divided into two kinds. First, in the 1920s–1930s, Naito Konan and Miyazaki Ichisada argued that the early modernity in Chinese history occurred in the 10th century. Their main reasons were: the Song Dynasty as a proto-nation-state, advanced long-distance trade, the collapse of the nobility, the system of civil service examination, the administrative system, and so on. The second kind of answer, from both the Marxist school and Fairbank's model of so-called "Western challenge/Chinese response", emphasized the importance of the expansion of Western capitalism and the force of industrialization or colonialism in the national building of modern China. Neither approach gave a satisfactory acknowledgement of the fact that modern China was in many ways shaped by the history of the Qing Empire. China, as a historian argued, is the only pre-twentieth-century agrarian empire to have sustained its political cohesiveness to the end of the twentieth century and to have become and remained both a nation and a state. So, how do we account for the national building of China in relation to its imperial legacy? Taking the rediscovery and transformation of the New Text Confucianism in the Qing period as a case, my project focuses on the study of classics and its relations to Qing politics: the

legitimation of multi-ethnic empire, legal pluralism, geographical survey in the northwest region and treaties with Russia in the 17th-century, treaties with sea powers in the 19th-century, the militarization in the post-Opium War context, etc.

I have almost finished the whole project during my stay at Wiko and will submit the manuscript of my book to the press soon after I return to Beijing. The discussions of the globalization group focused on questions concerning international law, Euro-China trade, the crisis of agriculture in Romania, the role of international organization, and so on and so forth. The approach and disciplines of scholars within this group differed in many ways from the empire group. As a matter of fact, the positions and fields of the scholars within this group were different, too. However, the discussions and debates were truly helpful for me in rethinking Chinese issues from different perspectives.

Before I came to Wiko, I finished an extended essay concerning the 1989 social movement and the origin of new liberalism in China, covering broad issues raised by Chinese topics. I presented it on the table of the globalization group. Unexpectedly, this long essay has been accepted as a small book and will be published next year in English. During my stay at Wiko, I was invited to give lectures at several universities in Germany and other European countries, which not only gave me the chance to communicate with European scholars, but also let me know more about European history and contemporary issues. At the same time, my travel in Europe and living in Germany reminded me of the distance between China and Europe. How can we find a way to shorten the distance? When I came here, I had a lot of questions about China and Europe and decided to do some research on these questions during my stay at Wiko. However, I found that I went back to China with more questions about China, Germany, and Europe in this era of so-called globalization that will take me a long time to think about. Not only for the progress of my own research, but also for these new questions, the year in Berlin was truly fruitful.