From River to Sea: Modernization as Ideology and the Reinvention of Tradition in Reform-Era China

Abstract: This article examines two television documentary series, River Elegy (1988) and To the Sea (2011), which provoked wide-spread reaction in Chinese society at different key historical moments. Underlying their seemingly oppositional stands is the uninterrupted dominance of modernization ideology, according to whose criteria the Chinese diagnose or even invent traditions as causes of China’s “backwardness” or “advance” in relation to the Western world set up as universal norms. A comparison of the two shows also allows for tracing the evolution of knowledge and meaning production mechanisms in China from the onset of the Reform in the late 1970s till the end of the first decade of the new century, a three-decade period during which the core of cultural elite changed from literati to technocrats. To call into question the uncritical embracing of modernization ideology as well as the utilitarian interpretive scheme of the past will be a first step toward thinking about alternatives for the future of China and the world.

Keywords: China, ideology, modernization, reform, maritime, tradition

INTRODUCTION

China’s Reform has been going on for over forty years since the late 1970s. The country and its people have been greatly transformed, so have China’s self-image and concept of its place in the world. In matter of fact, the exact term designating the reform in Chinese is gaige kaifang, the first word meaning “to reform,” the second “to open up,” two elements forming an inseparable, sacrosanct pairing which suggests that for China, reform means to open itself up and get changed with help from without. Reform what and open up to whom, exactly? The answers to these questions contain the rationale of the entire reform enterprise, as well as the key to understand it for China scholars. To put simply, when China desired to “change” at the end of the 1970s, modernization theory, which happened to be the most readily available theoretical resource, started to play the role of leading ideology for China’s reform ever since.

Modernization theory was invented during the Cold War in the American academia, especially in social science disciplines of sociology, anthropology and economics, to take up the challenge of communism, socialism and third-world nationalism (Latham 2000). According to this theory, “traditional” societies all follow a set path to reach the higher stage of “modern” society, attained already in Western Europe and North America. A nation’s “backwardness” was quantified as fifty years behind, a hundred years behind another set up as the “norm.” After unsuccessful applications in Africa and Latin America, by the end of the 1960s, modernization theory had lost much of its luster, but historical circumstances gave it a new life: the People’s Republic of China (PRC), exhausted from the radical experimentation that was the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), in desperate search for a path other than Maoist socialism deemed a failure, became the most ardent adept of modernization theory, which grew into the guiding ideology of the country’s reform. In their fixation on becoming “modern”, the Chinese discover, diverge, and even invent “traditions” as causes of China’s “backwardness” along the journey of reform, whose ultimate objective is to “catch up” with “the world”, i.e., the developed Western world.

This article analyzes two television documentary series, the 1988 River Elegy (heshang) and the 2011 To the Sea (zouxiang haiyang), to illustrate modernization ideology’s uninterrupted dominance in Reform-era China. Separated by a time laps of almost a quarter-century, the shows constitute two marker documents in China’s trajectory of the so-called reform. Despite seemingly oppositional stands, both adopt utilitarian interpretive schemes of the past, and the one’s invention of tradition with regard to the Chinese civilization is not more convincing than that of the other. A side-by-side examination of the two works also reveals how knowledge production evolved over time: while in the 1980s it was the literati who had the ability to influence the power core, at the beginning of the new century, elite technocrats orchestrate professionalized scholars to drive home a hegemonic ideology, and in both cases media and communication played a crucial role. The concluding remarks reflect on the limitations of China’s uncritical espousal of modernization ideology, and call for alternatives that would transcend dichotomic thinking.
**RIVER: “FEUDAL” TRADITION**

First famous then infamous, the 1988 self-appointed “political commentary series” River Elegy (heshang, abbreviated as River for the rest of the article) remains a symbol. Its meteoric rise and fall registered a historic moment. Aired twice — in June and August 1988 — on China Central Television (CCTV), the country’s biggest public television station, the six-episode series became a national hot topic; the published script of the show became a bestseller as well. But in the following months it would be condemned then banned, and in a year its main authors dispersed in exile. To today’s viewers, River’s delirium-like denigration of Chinese history and culture seems so outrageous that it may be very hard to imagine how such a piece was able to move a national audience to tears. A host of factors lie behind the phenomenon, and the show’s meaning is to be found in its context: River was brainchild of a young generation of intellectuals disillusioned with the recent practice of socialism, overwhelmed by the dominance of the Western world of their time, and desirous of a leading role in setting the agenda of reform in order to redress the country.

There has been a tendency to mystify the show, especially after it was banned, as a heroic gesture of rebellion against “the official Party line”. Quite the contrary was true. River was by all means an expression of the Zeitgeist of the 1980s. Here we should guard against a “state vs. civil society” model of analysis, which has very limited effect when it comes to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It is especially wrong to imagine the “Party,” the “intellectuals,” and the “people” as distinct entities that do not overlap. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is an elite organization whose leading cadre body assembles a large proportion of the country’s intellectuals including the best, and whose fifty million party members (back in River’s time. As of year 2020, the number is about ninety million) are mostly common people not possessing any privileges. It was the CCP itself who, become adept of modernization theory in the first place, initiated the Reform and Opening up. Reflecting a national consensus, River struck a chord with the entire population, gained support and sympathy all the way up to the top level of leadership, as well as cooperation from various parts of the state power apparatus. Troops of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) took part in shooting some scenes of the show, for instance.

With hindsight, the all-out attack that River launched on Chinese civilization is a hysterical cry of a depressed nation, symptom of the same kind of national depression Julia Kristeva (1998) diagnoses in post-De Gaulle France. River’s depiction of China as a “traditional society” rehearses every tenet of modernization theory that had been around in China in the 1980s. The show oversimplifies and essentializes civilizations along the lines of binary oppositions such as traditional vs. modern, barbaric vs. civilized, backward vs. advanced, industrial vs. rural, land-based vs. sea-borne, ad infinitum, and invariably allots China to the first category of each binary pairs, manifesting dichotomic thinking at its worst. The Chinese civilization is judged pre-modern, backward, unenlightened, despotic, self-isolating, in a word, primitive. The complex of interiority verges on self-hatred and self-loathing. Major symbols of the Chinese culture are vilified. The dragon is ugly. The Great Wall, an absurd idea. The Yellow River, formerly called “cradle of the Chinese civilization,” is a tyrannical force, and the yellow clay of its plateau, prone to produce nothing but closedness.

To the extent that River marks the nadir of China’s self-esteem, just like on the other side of the coin it reaches a new height in worship of the West. Overwhelmed by material achievements, reform China rejects the antagonistic stand vis-à-vis the Western world and takes the latter uniquely as “advanced industrial civilization,” a higher stage of development, symbolized by the blue ocean suggesting openness, progress, exchange, and out-looking posture. It is true that River seemed to be blind to problems in the West (Zarrow 1990: 1123), but to blame it on that is to miss the point, because the “real” West was not the show’s concern, but an invention that only existed in its creators’ imagination, an object of envy and emulation, what China should and would become one day. In River’s rosy dream, the “world” was a friendly, almost family-like “global village” waiting with open arms for China to join in. Such poigniant naïveté comes from defects in knowledge about the West on the part of River’s authors, but more importantly reflects the ideological nature of the show, in the sense that it expresses something taken for granted, close to faith, that does not need to be proved for those who already believe.

Consequently, because in the ideology of modernization “modern” is, de facto, equated to capitalism, reform China’s faith in socialism was shaken fundamentally. Acutely conscious about the rivalry between two social systems, China saw reform as the means to close up the gap with the other camp. When River came out in 1988, China was ten years into the reform with no prospect of a fast catching up in sight. To make things worse, just a year before, in 1987, the Party Congress concluded that China was still in “elementary phase of socialism”, a blow that the nation took hard. We can say that River symptomizes a nervous breakdown of the national psyche. The show’s apparent object of critique was the nation’s remote history, but the real target was the show’s own time, the PRC in the 1980s. In this sense River was intended to be an allegory by its creators, an allegory that was not lost on the domestic audience: one knew that the object of discontent was the Reform itself going on at the time of the show. In despair many came to the conclusion that reform was not the answer, that
China practiced socialism before its time. Here, the Marxist concept of linear development of history also played a role in the Chinese historical imagination. Many believed sincerely that true socialism would come one day, but every country had to go through the linear trajectory step by step, therefore capitalism could not be “skipped.” Given that, after toppling the Qing dynasty in 1911, China had not continued the bourgeois revolution, the knowledge and cultural elite wondered about the necessity to “make up for the missed lesson,” that is, to go through a full-term capitalist phase before getting to the next stage. A recurring topic of discussion for much of the 1980s among intellectual circles was why capitalism had emerged so late in China and had always been so weak. Echoing the concern, River laments that “capitalism did not develop in China,” and assigns itself the task of digging into history to find reasons for it, with the presumption that something innate of the Chinese civilization makes it unfit to foster capitalism.

There comes River’s most daring invention: to qualify Chinese culture as fengjian, rendered “feudal” in Standard English translation, which is regrettably inaccurate, used here for the sake of convenience only. As form of society the Chinese fengjian does not correspond to European feudalism, but to China starting from the Qin dynasty (221 B.C. to 207 B.C.), with a centralized state presiding over a unified country, to which the closest European parallel would be French absolutism under Louis XIV. Arguing that the too long, too entrenched feudal tradition produced despotic rulers and docile masses, both of whom were conservative, lacking spirit of adventure, River sets up feudalism as the main culprit for the Chinese civilization being rural, land-based, home-bound, by nature not a fertile field in which capitalism would emerge and grow, so much so that the multi-millennium history of China was nothing but repetitive dynastic changes with no real progress. Not surprisingly, such reductionist approach and hasty conclusion would shock the outsiders such as the circle of overseas China scholars. Jing Wang emphasizes, for example, that the show should not be taken for history, and it was to miss the point to pick factual defects that scattered the narrative, because the “fictive nature” of its historical imagination makes River a “creative reorganization of the past.” (Wang 1992: 130)

However, the undeniable fact that the domestic Chinese audience bought River’s “feudal” story demands explanation. The show’s success in this respect is due to the effective use of the biggest setback in China’s socialist practice, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In 1981, the CCP Central Committee passed Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China, which cast an unflinching verdict on the Cultural Revolution, condemning the event as well as the “personal cult” of its initiator, Mao Zedong. The total negation of the Cultural Revolution was a precondition of the Reform and opened the way for a self-critique of the most violent nature. The event so traumatized the entire nation, that more than a decade after its end, the collective memory was still living in its shadow. The consensus reached on national level, that the radical experimentation hindered China’s process of modernization, made the event an unredeemable villain and a convenient scapegoat to throw all responsibilities upon. River draws a parallel between the chaos into which the mass movement deteriorated and the cyclical turmoils in China’s long dynastic “feudal” history. The show’s repeated footage of Chairman Mao waving to enthusiastic crowds on Tian’anmen Square suggests blind worship that masses devoted to emperors. The accompanying narrative makes allusions that equate Mao to Qin Shihuang, to Zhu Yuanzhang, founding emperors of the Qin and the Ming dynasties, respectively. Through subtle allegory, is negated the revolutionary trajectory from the fall of the Qing Dynasty to the end of the Cultural Revolution, as meaningless bloodshed, because of the leaders’ cruelty, personal whims and the stupidity of the largely peasantry population. The manipulation of imagery on mass communication media of television was quite new to the 1980s Chinese audience, who fell under the spell of River’s adroit montage and editing. An important percentage of the viewers participated in the Cultural Revolution; the nightmarish scenes reminded them again and again of their past craze and raised in them a sense of shame. The visual had strong suggestive power on them and for many constituted irrefutable “proof” of China’s being “feudal.”

The “feudal thesis” is therefore largely a pretext to vent out remnant frustration toward a recent historic event, and find a reason for China’s missing out on capitalism, the “correct” course of development for the Chinese in the 1980s. The reinvention of history produced maximal effect when a particular group of individuals, the youngest generation of the traditional Chinese knowledge elite with heavy literary formation, authored the show. River’s main writer Su Xiaokang, a journalist specializing in reportage literature, born in 1949, the same year of the founding of the PRC, was not yet forty, whereas the director, Xia Jun, was then a 26-year old employee at CCTV. High-blown rhetoric is the hallmark of the thinking and writing style of this group, common shortcomings of intellectuals that old civilizations with long literary tradition tend to produce, similar to the community of French intellectuals whose “arguments freed from logic, propositions from evidence” can exasperate foreign readers (Anderson 2004). Su Xiaokang and his teammates had all the qualities and problems of the Chinese literati of whom they were the last cohort to enjoy national prestige. With undeniably sincere patriotism and strong sense of responsibility, the literati assumed the role of “social conscience” and functioned as mediators between the rulers and the masses. But they are also hopelessly narcissistic and self-important, whose pusillanimous and opportunistic behavior contradict the high moral standards of magnanimity and probity they set.

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In attempting to prescribe a roadmap for the PRC, however, River’s authors shouldered a task that was over their head. River’s message, that nothing Chinese was right, that the nation needed a new enlightenment — with the literati in the role of enlighteners — recycled the cultural determinism of the May Fourth generation to whom River’s writers appointed themselves heirs. Carried away in their impetus, River’s authors considered Deng Xiaoping, “capitalist roader” in Mao’s eyes and initiator of the comprehensive reform and opening-up, too conservative. Deng got his “full share of irreverent treatment” (Bodman 1991: 51) in the show, relegated to the cohort of “Mao Zedong and his comrades” in Episode 4. Such gesture of equating Deng and Mao nullified the achievements of the past decade of reform, and sent wrong signals regarding popular support for the so-called “wholesale westernization” (quankan xihua), to those inside the CCP leadership circle such as the then Secretary general of the Party Zhao Ziyang and his sympathizers, who were for more radical change not only in economy but also in the political system. Thus River got involved, indirectly, in the Party’s factional dispute.

Still, the show would have been just an over-the-top emotional diatribe of a group of immature, self-righteous young men, had world history not taken the turn it did at the end of the 1980s. The Western camp never abandoned the antagonistic stand against the socialist countries, and the Cold War was closing down on the latter. Inside the PRC, the consequences of the first decade of reform toward market economy caused discontent among the population and disagreement over the next direction to take. Multiple voices were raising, calling to deepen the reform or, to halt the reform and go back to “authentic” socialism. Protests developed into social unrest spearheaded by student demonstration. When students started to demonstrate in the spring of 1989, Western forces including Hong Kong and Taiwan saw a chance to help topple the CCP’s rule in China and did not hesitate to interfere with financial and logistics aid. A nationalistic party whose sense of mission to redress the country is no less strong than that of the literati, the CCP’s will to stay in power became only more adamant. After disciplined young PLA soldiers, obeying the order “not to take any action on people no matter what”, were murdered by mobs, the Party power core got on the defensive, Deng Xiaoping took the decision to drive demonstrators off the streets. In the aftermath of the 1989 events, River became object of a virulent condemnation campaign, accused of fostering subversive ideas aimed at overthrowing socialism in the PRC. The show was banned and its main creators either went into exile or were reduced to silence. Retrospectively speaking, River was the last gasp of a knowledge elite whose conceptualization of China and the world was “historically unsophisticated” (Zhong 2008: 163).

Despite a major crisis, the process of reform did not come to an end, and the ideology of modernization continued to reign.

**SEA: “MARITIME” TRADITION**

In 2011, a “maritime culture documentary”, To the Sea (zouxiang haiyang, abbreviated as Sea for the rest of the article), was broadcast nationally on CCTV-1. This new attempt to reposition the PRC in a changed world constitutes another marker text. The series of eight episodes running through history from the Shang dynasty (ca.1600 B.C. to 1046 B.C.) to the present in a maritime theme, celebrated China’s early advances as well as trumpeting China’s taking it to the high seas. The show’s overall upbeat tone reflected the “revival” (fuxing) mood in both official and popular milieus at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Sea is a particularly interesting object of study because it was a state backed-up project, jointly produced by the CCTV, the State Oceanic Administration, and the Chinese Navy Television Production Center. On the long thank-you list at the end of the show for help with the filming, one finds big state-owned enterprises (SOE) such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), as well as the North Sea Fleet, the East Sea Fleet, and the South Sea Fleet of the Chinese Navy. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Sea was a collective product of industrial, military and media elites with the will of the State behind them.

That the PRC, a “returning power” (Wu 2007: 1), has the primary concern to announce itself a “traditional sea power”, almost inevitably reminds us of the previously discussed 1988 documentary River. In fact, to the knowing audience, River has a ghost presence in Sea, given that the latter is in constant dialog with the former. On the one hand, Sea can be read as an anti-River. Sea’s narrative constructs China as always already a maritime culture. On the other hand, to the extent that China’s coming back to the sea after a multi-century-long hiatus is touted as positive, the 2011 series functions within the logic and along the same lines of
To make connections and comparisons of the two shows, therefore, is helpful in understanding the continued dominance of modernization theory in the realm of ideology for the PRC. Here a recapitulation of the post-1989 trajectory is imperative. “Victorious loser of the Cold War” in the sense that the PRC kept its political system while the Eastern Bloc collapsed; the Chinese lived much of the 1990s in confusion, not knowing exactly what to make of the events that were ongoing. For a moment it seemed that there were no other options but to resign and accept that capitalism was the last and final stage of human society. If this somehow vindicated those who challenged the government in 1989, the appalling disorder and misery in the former Eastern Bloc countries in the ensuing years alerted the Chinese to the danger of taking the medicines the West prescribed unconditionally. The boycott, sanctions, and humiliations that the West made China live through in the 1990s smashed the illusion that most Chinese, especially the liberal-leaning had, about a welcoming “world”. If F. Fukuyama’s “end of history” seemed hard to refute in the foreseeable future, S. Huntington’s predictions on “clash of civilizations” only came in to aggravate the dismay of the Chinese. Hostile external situations, ironically, played a crucial role in the forging of the national consensus on internal stability. Reinforced was China’s determination to “develop” and continue the process of “modernization”. Only by becoming “wealthy” (fu) and “strong” (qiang), it was believed, would China gain respect from and be treated on an equal footing by the West. Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “no discussion” (bu zhenglun) response to theoretical disputes, rather than a top-down imposition upon the domestic thought arena, was more an act of going along with a widely popular wish. For the next two decades, the Chinese no longer wrung their hands over whether their country was socialist or capitalist. Guided by the belief that “development is the cardinal principle” (faezhan shi yingdaoli), a GDP-oriented developmentalism was executed on every level nationwide. The PRC’s access to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 made the country an integral part of the neoliberal globalization. In 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010, the PRC surpassed France, the UK, Germany, and Japan, successively, to become the second largest economy of the world. According to some, in 2010, China already got ahead of the USA to become number one of the world in manufacturing industry (Deloitte 2011: 3).

The growth in material wealth up to the end of the first decade of the new century contrasts with a state of poverty in ideology. As China’s actual espousal of neoliberalism deepened, all fields were affected by a “politics of depoliticization.” The debate which broke out in the late 1990s and carried over into the early 2000s, between the pro-market “Liberals” and the more socially conscious “New Leftists”, ended with the latter’s further retreat into the ivory tower of the academia. The reshuffling of the knowledge elite continued through a process of bureaucratization and professionalization: former “intellectuals” became professors, scholars, researchers in universities, academic institutions, think tanks etc., as vividly reflected in a show like Sea. A closer look at the interviewees’ affiliations reveals a surprising number of bureaucratic units, most of which created since the new century. With the compartmentalization of the knowledge elite on full display, Sea offers a glimpse into the new landscape of knowledge production, where institutionalized elites play an ancillary role, their “expert opinions” being used selectively to buttress a state hegemony produced by technocrats. Drifting further away from Marxism and unable to go beyond the confines of modernization theory, Sea’s maritime-themed, nation-centered narrative conceptualizes history as permanent competition between nations, and falls back into the hackneyed rhetoric of advance and backwardness. In the show’s simplistic scheme, history is divided into three parts: when China was in the lead, when China lagged behind, and when China starts to “come back.” The lack of a grand narrative makes it difficult to justify China’s enterprises on moral high ground, especially when it comes to China’s high seas projects in the twenty-first century, as will be discussed later.

A volte-face from River’s merciless negation, Sea makes peace with the country’s past, revisiting and indulging in the glory of the good old days. China’s “advance” in maritime adventure in earlier time periods constitutes the core content of Episodes 1 to 3, as we hear in Episode 2 an expert saying that “China has always been a great maritime power.” Archeological findings, some more solidly examined than others, are used to support unevenly convincing arguments. The Shang people are presented as adept coastal navigators. The first emperor, Qin Shihuang, is said to host maritime ambitions because, the show argues, the terracotta armies in his tomb face the east. In fact, geographically speaking, the kingdom of Qin was situated in today’s Shaanxi province, at the west border of the seven major kingdoms. The unification of China achieved in the third century BC, therefore, was necessarily an eastward move from the perspective of the kingdom of Qin. “Looking to the east” would be more for land-conquering than for sea-faring projects. Such flimsy evidences betray the utilitarian approach of the show, as one sees in many other examples. To call the Zhou dynasty’s distribution of land China’s “first big western exploration”, clearly gestures toward the Hu Jintao administration’s development policy for western China. The Northern and Southern Song dynasties are praised for their “commodity economy” and “market economy,” at the risk of anachronism. Obsessed with ranking, Sea puts emphasis on China’s
leading status in history. Both the Northern and the Southern Songs were “the number one economies in the world of their time.” The Southern Song navy was “number one in the world.” Zheng He’s fleets in the Ming dynasty were “the biggest in human history until World War I.” One feels that the show forges, painstakingly, an image of ancient China according to that of the PRC at the beginning of the third millennium, on the way to becoming a major power on the world stage again.

As the Chinese reconcile with their ancestors, the target of antagonism in *Sea* switches to foreign forces. Self-appointed representative of the “the East”, *Sea* claims that the East and the West followed different “developmental paths,” the one more land-based, the other more sea-based. A concept of “civilizational particularities” (wenming tezhi) is proposed to explain the cause for such differences. The show’s contrived impartiality, however, is soon belied: the sense of competition is so acute that half way into Episode 1, the narrating voice, in a disarming tone, calls the ancient Greeks “losers,” their way of life “rootless like floating weeds.” Starting from Episode 4 titled “Debacle on the coastline,” the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam feature as foreign aggressors successively, and every time China engaged with the enemy militarily in self-defense. What emerges in *Sea* is a mystified Chinese nation whose historical specificities are ignored: ideological differences and regime changes are all erased, so much so that the PRC itself dissolves into a homogenized “Chinese history”. Episode 5, titled “Resetting the Sail,” covers the time span from 1916 to 1955 without singling out year 1949, that of the establishment of the PRC. The show presents a China struggling first against imperial Japan then the two superpowers, the Unites States and the Soviet Union. In its treatment of Jiangyin Battle in 1937 in the anti-Japanese war, the Kuomintang (KMT) navy is simply called “Chinese navy,” whose act of sinking their own ships in order to block the waterway to Japanese fleet is “unthinkable” yet “tragically heroic” because, the show says, the battle “frustrated Japan’s ambition to defeat and occupy China in three months.” Therefore a shameful defeat is turned into some sort of victory in the show. The civil war (1946-1949), defining event of the PRC, is glossed over in one sentence, or more precisely, in half a sentence: “Unfortunately, KMT initiated the civil war, therefore we had to await another era to rebuild the Chinese navy.” A “Chinese navy” was rebuilt effectively, based on absorption of the KMT navy personnel. Mao Zedong appears in this episode for the first time in the show, as the one who “turns his gaze to the sea.” The show quotes the words of Zhang Aiping, founder of the new navy, for whom the fusion of the KMT and the CCP navies is likened to “two cripples becoming one healthy man.” Gone is the deadly rivalry between two forces whose ideological stands were diametrically opposed. In a similarly way, the Yijiangshan Island Battle that took place in 1955 between PLA and KMT forces off the coast of Zhejiang province, is framed as a battle between China and the Americans, “destroying the imperialists’ efforts of blocking the new China”. It is true that the KMT regime, which fled to Taiwan as the result of the civil war, was backed up militarily and financially by the United States. But to cover up the frontline enemy’s identify in such a deliberate way is to change the nature of the conflict. *Sea*’s ahistorical behavior is, however, very much in line with the reform rationale. Taiwan being considered a model of successful modernization for the mainland to emulate (Meng 2020: 308), the elite of the PRC is eager to fill up the ideological cleavage between the two sides of the Strait, leaving out the PRC’s own revolutionary past to make room for a “Chinese nation” transcending divisions of any kind in fights against foreign forces that hindered China’s modernization. Episode 6 recapitulates how the Chinese relied on themselves and succeeded in making nuclear submarines, after the Soviets severed their aid following disputes between the two countries in the 1960s. Interestingly enough, part of these exploits were accomplished during the Cultural Revolution, which in the official discourse is a time period of nothing but chaos and destruction. The creators of the show contour the problem by not precisng their dates, but a sense of uneasiness remains.

One can almost feel a sigh of relief when Episode 7 hails the coming of the Reform and Opening up. In comparison with *River’s* refusal to recognize Deng Xiaoping’s arrival to power as the start of a new era, *Sea* conforms to the new orthodoxy of the post-1992 state rhetoric by paying due homage to Deng. The politically correct episode, entitled “Toward the sea,” opens up with Deng Xiaoping’s photo on the cover of January 1979 issue of *Time* magazine. Looking back in 2011 with a posteriori knowledge, the cultural elite considers the Reform a wise move that put China back on the right track to regain the lost front seat the nation deserves. Episodes 7 and 8 focus on China’s efforts of defending and exploring the oceans with an awakened “maritime awareness.” The show registers the moves of the PRC toward becoming a major player among peers: the Chinese Navy first passing through the so-called first island chain in 1980, the birth of China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) in 1982, the establishment of China’s South Pole station in 1984. After that, skipping the 1989 incident and the ensuing years, time fast-forwards to 1993, the year in which China officially changed from an oil exporter to an oil importer, and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) started multinational operations. The eighth and last episode projects the PRC’s pursuit of sea power full throttle since the beginning of the twenty-first century, appropriating a newly learned language of “national interest” and “energy security.” This appropriation, however, has its limits, and a closer look at some key moments in the show reveals the extent to which *Sea*’s framework of thinking is fundamentally the same as that of *River’s*, namely, the ideology of modernization. The show echoes the
official discourse in celebrating China’s joining the international community as a responsible member: in the footsteps of “over ten major maritime powers” patrolling the waters of the Gulf of Aden (Qian 2012: vi), China’s first naval task force headed for the same area on December 20, 2008. By December 2011, when Sea went on air, the Chinese Navy had dispatched ten anti-piracy task forces to conduct escort operations off the coast of Somalia. Significantly, however, what is actually shown on screen in Episode 8 is not any of the executed operations, but a prior scene that happened on December 17, 2008. That day, the Chinese cargo vessel Zhenhua 4, on its way back from a mission, became target of an attempted pirate attack. Accompanying the footage of the confrontation, filmed by crew members onboard presumably, the narrator goes:

At eight o’clock in the morning, the atmosphere suddenly became tense, seven full-armed pirates pressed on. Zhenhua 4 was lucky, as were its thirty brave crewmen. In a battle of unequal forces, incendiary bombs and high-pressure water taps got the upper hand of bazookas, submarine guns and heavy machine guns. But how can one keep the “lifeline at sea” safe with just luck and courage?

The choice of an “ante-” moment befits a novice military power that is the PRC particularly concerned about justifying its action to a potential world audience. Recourse to the habitual rhetoric of victimization is meant to suggest that once again China reacts in self-defense. But there is something deep further. Although common sense predicts that China’s high seas enterprise will engender inevitably competition and adversary with other maritime powers, and especially an eventual face-off with the current hegemon — the United States, such scenarios are difficult for Sea’s creators to imagine, in fact they would prefer they never have to. In the hierarchy set up by the modernization scheme, that still dominates the mindset of this cultural elite, China sits squarely below the “West” and above Third World parts such as “Africa” Sea’s treatment signals its creators’ falling back to their ideological comfort zone: because of this footage, the only human face of contemporary “evil” in the entire show is that of Somali pirates. Sea willingly equates the latter to terrorist-style “bad guys” who disturb the “peaceful oceans” and whom China volunteers to rid the world of. In so doing, at least within the narrative space of the show, the PRC avoids envisaging clash with Western opponents that lies ahead in the future, a prospect it wishes to postpone indefinitely. In the final analysis, the industrial, military and media elites behind Sea are no more up to task than the generation that produced River when it comes to conceptualizing the nation on a par with the “developed” ones.

CONCLUSION

How far did China go from 1988 to 2011, from River to Sea? Not very far, it seems. Over a time span of twenty-three years, the Chinese reacted to what they perceived to be China’s relative position in the “normal” course of “development” that the ideology of modernization draws for all countries on earth: with exasperation in River, and with some regained confidence in Sea. A side-by-side comparison of their endings would help us see more clearly. At the end of River, the Yellow River runs into the Pacific, offering a contrast of yellow and blue, then the camera zooms out to give a view of China from outer space while the voice-over goes:

The surging waves of the sea will here meet head on with the Yellow River.
The Yellow River must eliminate its fear of the sea.
The Yellow River must preserve the dynamism and unaunted resolve which comes from the plateau.
The waters of life arise from the sea and flow back into the sea.
After a thousand years of solitude, the Yellow River has finally seen the blue sea.

In the last sequence of Sea, the narrator says:

In 1997, Hong Kong’s coming back to China washed the nation’s hundred-year humiliation. That same year, a soldier stationed in the Nansha Islands was surprised by what he discovered: China’s territory is not a “rooster,” but resembles more a torch with flame — the land of 9, 6 million km² is the burning fire, the marine territory of 3 million km² being the torch’s tray and handle. The amazing nature seems to suggest something. The ocean is humanity’s future. China, the torch that enlightens the East, its energy will come from the sea, its force of development will also come from the sea. Let us explore the ocean, embrace the azure, and sustain the hope of the great revival of the Chinese nation.

At the same time, the image of a flaming torch is superposed to China viewed from above the planet Earth, the lower part of the torch corresponding to the South China Sea, marked by a nine-dashed line in white.

One is amazed to see the extent to which the two shows function in a continuum. Common to both is an obsession to “join” a pre-established world order through transformation, restoration, or complementation of China’s old self, a nationalistic agenda which has to exteriorize, literally, to a visual representation of the country on the global scale. The fixation to become “modern,” as “modern” as the already “modern” nations symbolized by the sea, has been pushing the PRC to pursue economic development, territorial claim, and military buildup, feeding into “China threat theories” raised by concerned parties. Domestically, neoliberalism, the latest avatar of modernization, gave
rise to problems such as widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, unbalanced development between regions, and social unrest. Two years after Sea, in 2013, the Xi Jinping administration proposed the “Belt and Road Initiative,” which mobilizes the historical role that both land and sea played in China’s connection with the other parts of the world. Whether it signals an ideological breakthrough, it is still too early to say. But the initiative’s call for building a “community of common destiny for humanity” (renlei mingyun gongtongti) primarily through cooperation not competition, gives hope for recognizing the precedence of individual and human welfare over national interests and geopolitical power. The world will have much to benefit if China’s “rise” can break from the modernization paradigm.

Acknowledgments
This article is part of the project “Sino-African relations in Chinese and foreign media,” supported by the Country and Area Studies Center of Zhejiang International Studies University.

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