

Göttinger Vorträge zum modernen China

Frugal Modernity: Consumption and Morality in Republican China

Margherita Zanasi,
Associate Professor of Modern Chinese History & Director of Asian Studies
Louisiana State University

Ort: Verfügungsgebäude VG 0.110, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 7
Zeit: 8. Juni 2011, 16.15 - 17.45 Uhr

Abstract

Since the late nineteenth century, when the idea of economic modernization came to be closely associated with nationalist goals, the role of consumption in China's economic modernization became a topic of intense debate. At the center of this debate was the question of whether conspicuous or frugal consumption would better foster economic modernization and benefit the nation most. This debate also raised wider issues on the meaning of modernity and China's modern identity. Should the cosmopolitan and Westernized culture of consumption filtering into China through the treaty ports constitute the basis of China's modern identity or should China instead develop its own style of modern consumption? Should China embrace capitalist-style consumerism or a more austere but, some argued, economically more efficient style of livelihood?

The idea of frugality thus came to be deployed in an attempt to take distance from Western-style economic modernity, while preserving a supposedly essential characteristic of China's own tradition. Frugality would be a key feature of a Chinese mode of economic modernity that sought to strike a balance between morality and prosperity and to keep "morality" within economic development, avoiding what was perceived as an inexorable march toward a modern life characterized by negative "materialism," which, advocates of frugality maintained, was antithetical to China's essential nature.

Support for "frugal modernity" spanned across political boundaries, finding supporters among widely different political groups and helping pave the way for the aesthetics of austerity that would characterize the Mao's years. Echoes of this Republican debate can be heard in today's China, where issues of identity, consumerism, and morality are still the focus of lively debate.