

## ‘FOCAL’ MODEL OF MODERNIZATION

Modernization is a process whereby a society that is traditional and agrarian at heart is transformed into an urban society. The society does not change as a whole. Rather, it is the towns that change first. They evolve from residences of power and places of social classes into centers of education, industry and business activity. Urban culture in the present-day sense of the word is emerging. It is a history and time-centric culture, and not just a culture preoccupied by the everlasting, unchangeable order of life. A human being acquires ethical independence and his behavior and his principles become a matter of his own choice.

**The process of modernization first involves separate ‘focal points’ or ‘sites’, and later, a given nation state creates a framework for the integration of these ‘sites of modernity’ with enclaves characterized by a traditional society.** To use a term put forth by the popular futurologist Alvin Toffler, the ‘second wave’, of technological development should take over and build upon the ‘first wave’.

Today in Russia, the notion of ‘focal modernization’ is mostly understood as being a kind of lead-up to the ‘third wave’. This is defined as post-industrial production achieved on the basis of knowledge and innovation. The most difficult thing here is that the ‘third wave’, according to Toffler, doesn’t leave space for any nation state at all. It is international in essence and is focused on global centers of intellectual class reproduction. Today there is only one center of this kind and it is situated in the USA. Is that all? One who wishes to create something like that at home must first engage a system for which the keys and controls are located on the other side of the Atlantic.

Is there any other model of modernization possible, apart from one that is ‘focal’ in nature? Is the nationalization of such ‘modernity sites’, so to speak, even possible? That is to say, nationalization in a way similar to the processes that have made people, at different stages of technological development, equal citizens of their states?

## SHANGHAI AS A FOCUS OF MODERNIZATION

Vladimir Malyavin

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*On May 1st, 2010, the World Trade Exposition ‘Expo 2010’ opened in Shanghai. This city is widely regarded as the center of modernization in the present-day China. The scale of this megalopolis’ development is impressive, even against the background of the generally rapid economic growth of the Celestial Empire. One of the world’s leading Russian sinologists, Vladimir Malyavin, shares his interpretation of Chinese modernization with the Russian Journal.*

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**The Shanghai ‘Expo-2010’ lends insight into the future, which, fortunately, cannot be boundless.** For the organizing country, the World Expo has always been a perfect opportunity to demonstrate its achievements

and ambitions. Forty years ago, I was a student when the Osaka World Expo made a splash at a time when the suddenly-resurrected Japan strived for world leadership and continued to shock the world by its transistors, cars and even by shirts and swimming trunks made of nylon (‘smooth to the touch’, as it was written on the labels for customers in the Soviet Union). Recently my Japanese friend wrote to me, ‘We abandoned the idea of moving ahead a long time ago. Now we enjoy only those things which exist inside Japan itself, for instance, like Sakura blooms. I hope that in these turbulent times of rapid change, we will be able to preserve these kind traits of the Japanese character’.

It is convenient for the relatively small Japan to enclose itself in its island shell. But will the huge and multi-cultural China be able to do

the same thing when its current modernization dynamic runs out of steam? This is a question for future reference. Meanwhile, the Chinese are revelling in their economic upswing and are relentless in making statements about their new global ambitions. **Passengers who arrive in Shanghai are informed, while still on the plane, that ‘China will serve as a bridge between Asia and the world’.** At the first World Taoist Forum, which recently took place in Beijing, Chinese participants frequently repeated comments to the effect that Chinese culture will play the leading role in the world. This jingoism has a solid foundation in real life. An example of this can be seen in the fact that passengers of the Shanghai metro listen to announcements made in English. This is a more common occurrence because ‘Expo 2010’ has spurred several new under-

ground lines to be opened at the same time. Girls from the countryside working in the Expo's restaurants are thrilled with delight when they speak with foreigners, whom they are probably seeing for the first time ever. They have found themselves in a brand-new joyful and exciting world and they seem to genuinely believe in the exhibition motto 'A better city, a better life'. And such a belief is a resource that is proving more valuable than money.

Chinese ambitions are generally understood in the world. The 'Expo 2010' has attracted a record number of participants from about one hundred and fifty countries, and its territory occupies an area of about nine square kilometres. This is the new Chinese caliber.

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I confess that, in the end, I was also affected by the current Chinese momentum and also China's power. Wherever it is that you first arrive in China, you will see gigantic airports with the highways spreading out from them through a maze of traffic interchanges. The horizon is lined by a skyline formed of parallel box-like high buildings. The life of the city is seething and splashing. It is as if some miracle-mill is in operation here and working somewhere at the bottom of the Yangtze or maybe at the bottom of ponds of the Forbidden City – one that is churning out new airports and highways, living quarters, skyscrapers, department stores, tons of cars, computers and clothes. Who was able to and how did they adjust the drive belts of the sacred machinery of the Chinese soul toward the material world? What are the forces that make them move?

This is the fourth time I have visited the village of Zhouzhuang. It is a romantic vestige of old China. I am again passing along its narrow streets, admiring its coquettishly hooped bridges over the channels, and I breathe in the emptiness of its lonely temples. In the twilight of empty halls, the old inscriptions over the altars are hardly visible. They sound as if they were written under the latest



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directions of the party and government: 'Trade, when it prospers, penetrates all the Four Seas. Wealth, being in abundance, reaches the Three Rivers' [in other words, China – *author's note*]. Everywhere, on the chair backs, walls, tables and even on the stools, the polished marble carvings are incrustated. Their design strangely resembles landscape paintings. The abundance of such carvings doesn't create an impression of monotony because the possibilities of

playing with abstract images and representing them as subjects are practically unlimited. Still, the number of these extravagant interior details clearly overpasses proper aesthetic requirements. The significance, of course, is in their high-status role, as expensive marble carvings attest to the wealth of a given family. The word 'landscape' itself (the word-for-word translation of this term is 'mountains and waters') translates in the local dialect as 'one has wealth, one has fortune'.

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It is a remarkable and purely Chinese invention to find an image of an unreachable distance inside a stone. It is a real 'geology of transcendence' as I once called Shanghai life. It is the best way to realise a timeless Chinese ideal: 'to finish the work of Heaven by means of human work'. I'd like to add that this work is masterfully perfect, not leaving any marks behind. In this regard, Roger Caillois once said that he 'liked the perfection of ostensibility'. Well, does China which has showered the world with copycats of everything, really play the 'leading role' at this festival of modern life?

So here is the formula of Chinese wisdom: reality is exchange, the meaning of life is trade (in Chinese this sounds tautological), but while accumulating life forces, we also increase our capital. Life provides everything with which to enjoy it. One does not have to spend money on anything (the level of savings in China is fantastically high). The material world, which is involved with exchange, becomes a representation of the highest symbolic order, and we spend our capital according to its principles only to prove our symbolic status. A very thrifty Chinese citizen easily wastes big money on trifles only to 'save face'. Throughout society, what we are turning into is a capitalist-oriented socium with an ideocratic and very much formalized political system. ■

*Exclusively for Russian Institute*