

# Standards of Modernity- China and Europe

Kelly Donaghue, Harbor School, Boston, Massachusetts

- I. Introduction
  - II. Learning Objectives
  - III. Grade Level and Time Required
  - IV. Background Information for Teachers
  - V. Student Activities: Investigation, Discussion, and Debate
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## Introduction

In this lesson, students will examine and analyze various technologies and ideas associated with “modernity” by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Upon careful review and comparison of European and Chinese factors- students will engage in a debate regarding the following guiding question:

*“What, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, constituted modernity, and how do Europe and China compare in their fulfillment of that standard?”*

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to:

- Understand and identify what was modern by 19<sup>th</sup> –century standards
- Analyze and compare the abilities of China and Europe to fulfill those requirements
- To determine what role Eurocentricity has played in traditional teaching of “what is modern?”

## **Grade Level and Time Required**

Grades 9-12; two class periods, with homework assignments

## **Background Information for the Teacher**

Review the Web module “China and Europe 1500-2000 and Beyond: What is ‘Modern’?” on the Asia for Educators site (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/>)

Note in particular:

- Bin Wong's definition of modernity "a political system with democratic representation, an economy that has an industrial sector, and a social system with urban workers, professionals, and businessmen."
- Kenneth Pomeranz's suggestion that we should first compare *similarities* between China and Europe before identifying differences.
- Bin Wong's argument that traditional teaching has suggested that modernity is associated with that which was experienced in Europe (England) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century only, and "what existed in the rest of the world until the Europeans arrived" was not at all considered modern.

Also recommended:

John M. Hobson's [The Eastern Origins of Western Civilizations](#) for a thorough account of the origins of technologies that were considered Western, but actually were adopted from the East (specifically the Muslim world and China).

### **Student Activities: Investigation, Discussion, and Debate**

1. "What is modern?"
  - Have students brainstorm in small groups, and share their ideas about a standard for modernity in 2008.
  - Next, have them use prior knowledge of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and available textual resources to devise a definition for modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century.
  - Discuss what the standard could be for that era, then read the Bin Wong piece "Redefining the Modern World", and share his criteria for modernity. (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s2/index.htm>)
2. Divide the class in half (group A and B), with each group responsible for reporting on either (A) European innovations or (B) Chinese innovations. Charge both groups with being able to explain the origin, earliest use, and significance of the following:
  - Guns, gunpowder
  - Shipbuilding
  - Crank-drive engines
  - Free market economy
  - Taxation
  - Compass
  - Paper
  - Moveable type
  - Canals and suspension bridges

Information on these inventions is available on the site below:

- “China’s Gifts to the West”  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s10/gifts.pdf>
- “Chinese Ideas in the West”  
<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s10/ideas.pdf>
- “Timeline of Chinese Inventions”  
[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s10/0781\\_sect10\\_timeline.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/chinawh/web/s10/0781_sect10_timeline.pdf)

Additional information can be found in chapters 1-3, and 6 of the Hobson text.

3. Ask each group to pool their findings and to create a chart detailing the origins of these devices.
4. (*Homework*) Each group should then be given a reading assignment and asked to summarize the main points:

**Group A** – reads a teacher selected piece from a “traditional” text which emphasizes European modernity in the Industrial Age context. (Suggested text: The Human Record-Sources of Global History, Andrea, Alfred J. and Overfield, James H. “Chapter 8: The West in the Age of Industrialization and Imperialism”), summarizing the main arguments of the essay.

**Group B** -- reads the Bin Wong piece titled “Appreciating Asian Dynamics,” summarizing Wong’s main points.

5. Preparation for debate:  
Each group should then spend some time preparing to debate the lesson’s guiding question:

*“What, by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, constituted modernity, and how do Europe and China compare in their fulfillment of that standard?”*

6. Debate. Each side presents “opening statements,” has a turn at presenting its evidence and questioning the opponent’s argument, followed by “closing arguments”.
7. Conclusion: Lesson will conclude with students individually responding, in writing, to the guiding question. This reflective writing piece will serve as an assessment of understanding of new material for the teacher.