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Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center

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*Cultural China: the periphery as
the center*

The inscription of the Tang's basin reads, "If one day you truly renew yourself, day after day you will renew yourself; indeed, renew yourself every day." In the "Announcement to the Prince of Kang" it is said, "You shall give rise to a renewed people." In the *Book of Poetry* it is said, "Though Zhou is an old state, the Mandate it holds is new." For this purpose, the profound person exerts himself to the utmost in everything.

– The Great Learning¹

China, one of the longest continuous civilizations in human history, "may be visualized as a majestic flowing stream."² Chinese culture, the generic term symbolizing the vicissitudes

of the material and spiritual accomplishments of the Chinese people, has undergone major interpretive phases in recent decades and is now entering a new era of critical self-reflection. The meaning of being Chinese is intertwined with China as a geopolitical concept and Chinese culture as a living reality.

For China, Chinese people, and Chinese culture, the image of the twentieth century as an atrocious collective experience of destructiveness and violence emerges with fulgent salience as we approach the *fin de siècle* rumination. Stability has often meant a delicate balance for a few years; even a decade of peaceful coexistence evokes memories of permanence. The fluctuating Chinese political landscape, precipitated by external events unprecedented in Chinese history since the mid-nineteenth century, has become so restless in the last decades that not only the players but the rules of the game have constantly changed. For instance, in the eight decades since the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, a suc-

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1 Daniel K. Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on the Confucian Canon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 96 – 97 with minor modifications.

2 Herbert Passin, "The Occupation – Some Reflections," *Dædalus* 119 (3) (Summer 1990): 125.

cession of different versions of the state constitution were drafted and promulgated in both the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China. Not revisions or amendments, each new version superseded the previous one.³ Indeed, virtually no institution of significance (university, church, press, professional society, or civic organization) has lasted for more than a generation. The two major parties (the Nationalist and the Communist) seem to have endured in form, but they both have been so substantially and radically restructured that a sense of cynicism and uncertainty prevails among their members. The most devastating rupture, however, occurred within the intellectual community.

Although China has never been subjected to the kind of comprehensive colonial rule experienced by India, China's semicolonial status severely damaged her spiritual life and her ability to tap indigenous symbolic resources. Chinese intellectuals have been much more deprived than their Indian counterparts ever were. While Indian intellectuals have continued to draw from the wellsprings of their spiritual lives, despite two centuries of British colonialism, the Western impact fundamentally dislodged the Chinese intellectuals from their Confucian haven. Having loosened their moorings in a society which had provided a secure and respected anchorage for their predecessors for more than two millennia, they desperately tried to find a niche in a cruel new

3 In the history of the People's Republic of China, four radically different constitutions were implemented between 1954 and 1982. For an indictment against the Chinese Communist Party's abuse of constitutional authority, see Yan Jiaqi, "China Is Not Actually a Republic" and "May 17th Manifesto," in Yan Jiaqi, *Toward a Democratic China: My Intellectual Autobiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming).

world defined in terms of power with or without wealth. Their sense of impotence, frustration, and humiliation, prompted by a curious mixture of political nationalism and cultural iconoclasm, framed the context for their quest for identity not only as Chinese but as thinking and reflective Chinese in an increasingly alienating and dehumanizing world.

The question of Chineseness, as it first emerged in the "axial age" half a millennium prior to the birth of Confucius in 551 B.C., entails both geopolitical and cultural dimensions. While the place of China has substantially expanded over time, the idea of a cultural core area first located in the Wei River Valley, a tributary of the Yellow River, and later encompassing parts of the Yangtze River has remained potent and continuous in the Chinese consciousness. Educated Chinese know reflexively what China proper refers to; they may not be clear about the periphery but they know for sure that the center of China, whether Xi'an or Beijing, is in the north near the Yellow River. The archaeological finds in recent decades have significantly challenged the thesis that China grew from the Wei Valley like a light source radiating from the center. Even in neolithic periods, there were several centers spreading across present-day China. The Middle Kingdom came into being as a confederation of several equally developed cultural areas rather than growing out of an ever-expanding core.⁴ Yet, regardless of this scholarly persuasive explanation of the origins of Chinese civilization, the impression that geopolitical China evolved through a long pro-

4 Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 4th ed., rev. and enl. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

cess centering around a definable core remains deeply rooted.

If the presumed core area was instrumental in forming a distinctive Chinese identity, Chinese culture symbolizing a living historical presence made the sense of being Chinese even more pronounced; it signified a unique form of life profoundly different from other styles of living often condemned as barbarian. The expression *hua* or *huaxia*, meaning Chinese, connotes culture and civilization. Those who lived in China proper were, inter alia, cultured and civilized, clearly differentiable from those barbarians in the periphery who had yet to learn the proper ways of dressing, eating, dwelling, and traveling. On the surface, the classical distinction between Chinese and barbarians was predicated on the divergence of two drastically different modes of life: the agrarian community of the central plain and the nomadic tribes of the steppes.⁵ But the rise of Chinese cultural consciousness was occasioned by primordial ties defined in ethnic, territorial, linguistic, and ethical-religious terms. Although it is often noted that culture, rather than ethnicity, features prominently in defining Chineseness, the cultured and civilized Chinese, as the myth goes, claim a common ancestry. Indeed, the symbol of the “children of the Yellow Emperor”⁶ is constantly reenacted in Chinese literature and evokes feelings of ethnic pride.

This idea of being Chinese, geopolitically and culturally defined, is further reinforced by a powerful historical consciousness informed by one of the most

voluminous veritable documents in human history. Indeed, the chronological annals have flowed uninterrupted since 841 B.C. This cumulative tradition is preserved in Chinese characters, a script separable from and thus unaffected by phonological transmutations. Whether or not it is simply a false sense of continuity, the Chinese refer to the Han (206 B.C. – A.D. 220) and Tang (618 – 907) dynasties as if their greatness still provides practicable standards for contemporary Chinese culture and politics.

The Middle Kingdom syndrome, or the Middle Kingdom complex,⁷ may have made it psychologically difficult for the Chinese leadership to abandon its sense of superiority as the center, but we must also remember that China had never been thoroughly challenged by an alien equal – if not superior – civilization until the penetration of the West in the mid-nineteenth century. The “Buddhist Conquest of China”⁸ entailed the introduction, domestication, maturation, and development of Indian spirituality in China for more than six hundred years, culminating in the intense Sinitization of Buddhist teachings in distinctively Chinese schools of Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan.⁹ The military and political domination of the Middle Kingdom by the Jurchens, the Khitans, the Mongols, and the Manchus in the last millennium was compensated, in cultural terms, by the Sinicization of Jin, Liao,

7 For a recent reference to the “Middle Kingdom Complex,” see Lucian Pye, “China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society,” *Foreign Affairs* 69 (4) (Fall 1990): 62.

8 Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1959).

9 Arthur Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1953).

5 Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940).

6 Lynn Pan, *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: A History of the Chinese Diaspora* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990).

Yuan, and Qing into legitimate Chinese dynasties. China survived these “conquests” as a geopolitical entity and Chinese culture flourished. Nevertheless, if we take seriously the image of “a majestic flowing stream,” we must acknowledge that these great outside influences altered this stream at various points. In accordance with this, China, or Chinese culture, has never been a static structure but a dynamic, constantly changing landscape.

In the Chinese historical imagination, the coming of the West, however, could be seen as more “decentering”; it was as if the Buddhist conquest and the Mongol invasion had been combined and compressed into one generation. It is understandable, therefore, that it has thoroughly destroyed the “pattern of the Chinese past”¹⁰ and fundamentally redefined the *Problematik* for the Chinese intellectual. The convulsive disturbances that geopolitical China has suffered since the Opium War (1839–1942) are well documented,¹¹ but the effervescences in Chinese culture which eventually brought about the intriguing paradox of iconoclasm and nationalism of the May Fourth (1919) generation (as well as subsequent generations) are so elusive that scholars of modern thought are still groping for a proper explanatory model to probe them.¹²

10 Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1973).

11 Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–1842* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

12 Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). For a thought-provoking attempt to come to terms with the May Fourth intellectual ethos, see Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth*

A radical manifestation of this ambivalent May Fourth legacy is the recent advocacy of comprehensive modernization qua Westernization in the People’s Republic of China after the official closure of the devastating Cultural Revolution decade (1966–1976). This new rhetoric is deceptively simple: since China’s backwardness, fully acknowledged by the Chinese intelligentsia as occasioned by the open-door policy of the reform, had deep roots in the Chinese polity, society, and culture, a total transformation of Chineseness is a precondition for China’s modernization. Strategically, the most painful and yet effective method of this total transformation is to invite the modern West with all of its fruitful ambiguities to “decenter” the Chinese mentality. This wishful thinking – liberation through a willing and willful confrontation with radical otherness – has become a powerful countercultural thrust against both ossified Marxism-Leninism and the still vibrant “habits of the heart”¹³ molded by the Confucian tradition.

The “River Elegy,” a controversial, interpretive, six-part television series on Chinese cultural roots and ethos, straightforwardly advocated the necessity of embracing the blue ocean as the only way to save the “Yellow Earth.”¹⁴

Movement of 1919 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

13 A seminal term in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is used by Robert Bellah and his coauthors to characterize the individual ethos of contemporary American culture. See Robert Bellah et al., *The Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

14 The contrast of the blue ocean and the “Yellow Earth” is used in the “River Elegy” to show the open, dynamic, and exploratory spirit of the West and the closed, stagnant, and insular mentality of China.

Aired twice in 1988, the “River Elegy” provoked a heated nationwide debate on tradition, modernity, change, China, and the West.¹⁵ From top Party leaders and intellectuals to workers, soldiers, and farmers, from the metropolitan areas of Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan to the sparsely populated Great Northwest, several hundred million citizens were affected by the central message: China, behind even western Africa in per capita income, would soon be disfranchised as a player in the international game.¹⁶ The intellectual community was stunned by the poignancy of the question, Whither China? Overwhelmingly siding with the radical Westernizers, they have accepted that reform requires the courage to restructure China fundamentally by importing proven models of success. The sacred symbols of the ancestral land stand condemned. The dragon, the symbol of Chinese ancestry, is condemned as outmoded imperial authoritarianism;¹⁷ the Great Wall, the symbol of historical continuity, is condemned as a manifestation of closed-minded conservatism; and the Yellow River, long regarded as the cradle of Chinese civilization, is condemned as unmitigated violence against innocent people. The

unstated message, obvious to most, gives a warning, and indeed an outright challenge to the power holders of the Party: speed up the reform or else! Chineseness, under scathing assault, is ironically made to stand for the modus operandi of an authoritarian, conservative, and brutal ruling minority.

The paradox embedded in the message of the “River Elegy” evokes memories of the May Fourth intellectual dilemma: the intertwining of nationalism (patriotism) and iconoclasm (antitraditionalism).¹⁸ This leads inevitably to a whole set of thought-provoking questions. If Chinese intellectuals in China proper are so thoroughly disgusted with Chinese culture, can they define their Chineseness as an exclusive commitment to wholesale Westernization? If their condemnation of things Chinese is total, does this mean that they have voluntarily forfeited their right to be included in a definition of Chineseness? For Chinese intellectuals living in China proper, can the meaning of being Chinese be sought in the limbo between a past they have either deliberately relegated to a fading memory or been coerced into rejecting or forgetting, a present they have angrily denounced, and an uncertain future, since they insist that the promise lies wholly in the alien unknown? The way these issues are formulated may appear relevant only for a tiny minority – the articulate and self-reflective intelligentsia – but the emotional intensity provoked by the debate has affected the Chinese populace in general.

The rise of Japan and the so-called Four Mini-Dragons (South Korea, Taiwan,

15 Frederic Wakeman, Jr., “All the Rage in China,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 2, 1989, 19–21.

16 In 1988 mainland China’s per capita income was US\$330, while the average for sixteen countries in western Africa was \$340. “1990 World Population Data Sheet,” Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C.

17 For example, Yan Jiaqi, a prominent leader of the Alliance for a Democratic China, is an articulate critic of the “dragon mentality.” In his *World Economic Herald* (*Shijie jingji daobao*, Shanghai) interview with Dai Qing, “China Is No Longer a Dragon” (March 21, 1988), he specifically berates the symbolism of the dragon.

18 Yu-sheng Lin, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

Hong Kong, and Singapore) as the most dynamic region of sustained economic development since the Second World War raises challenging questions about tradition in modernity, the modernizing process in its different cultural forms. Does it suggest the necessity, indeed, the desirability of a total iconoclastic attack on traditional Chinese culture and its attendant comprehensive Westernization as a precondition for China's modernization?¹⁹ From the perspective of economic organization, does this new capitalism, labeled as *guanxi* (network and connections) capitalism, contrasted with the classical capitalism of Western Europe, signal a new age – the age of the Pacific Rim?²⁰ Or, is it merely an epiphenomenon that can be explained in terms of existing European and American development models? Politically speaking, are we witnessing a process of democratization based more on consensus formation than on adversarial relationships, giving a wholly new shade of meaning to the concept of participatory democracy? Or, are we observing the continuous presence of the hierarchical authoritarian control of a political elite operating under the guise of majority rule?²¹ Socially, do family cohesiveness, low crime rates, respect for education, and a high percentage of savings relative to that of other industrial societies indicate an ethos different from the individual-centered “habits of the

heart”?²² Or, do they simply reflect an earlier stage of modern transformation, which will lead eventually to the anomie and alienation experienced in the West? Culturally, do these societies symbolize successful examples of advanced technology being combined with age-long ritual practices, or are they simply the passing phases of traditional societies?²³ In short, how does the rise of East Asia challenge our deep-rooted conceptions of economic growth, political development, social transformation, and cultural change?

These questions are significant for interpreting the meaning of being Chinese; they are potentially provocative to the overwhelming majority of Chinese intellectuals in mainland China who believe that Chineseness is incongruous with the modernizing process, defined purely in terms of science and democracy. If, indeed, the “Sinic world”²⁴ or the “post-Confucian”²⁵ region has succeeded in assuming a form of life definitely modern, distinctively East Asian – by implication Chinese as well – the sharp dichotomy between tradition and modernity must be rejected as untenable, as useless in analyzing developing countries as well as more highly industrialized or postindustrial societies. Any

19 Tu Wei-ming, “A Confucian Perspective on the Rise of Industrial East Asia,” 1687th Stated Meeting Report, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 42 (1) (October 1988): 32–50.

20 S. Gordon Redding, *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

21 Lucian Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

22 Peter Berger and Hsin Huang Hsiao, eds., *In Search of an East Asian Development Model* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1988).

23 Tu Wei-ming, “The Rise of Industrial East Asia: The Role of Confucian Values,” *Copenhagen Papers in East and Southeast Asian Studies* (April 1989): 81–97.

24 Edwin O. Reischauer, “The Sinic World in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs* 52 (2) (January 1974): 341–348.

25 Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Post-Confucian Challenge,” *The Economist* 9 (February 1980): 67–72.

attempt to measure the degree of modernization with a linear developmental scale is thought to be simpleminded. Although this point has been repeatedly argued by culturally sophisticated modernization theorists since the early 1970s,²⁶ the presence of an empirically verifiable phenomenon makes the argument even more convincing.²⁷

Since traditional features of the human condition – ethnicity, mother tongue, ancestral home, gender, class, and religious faith – all seem to be relevant in understanding the lifeworlds of societies, both modern and developing, the need to search for roots, despite the pervasiveness of global consciousness, is a powerful impulse throughout the world today.²⁸ If there is an alternative path to capital formation, then democracy, technology, and even modernization may indeed assume different cultural forms. The most radical iconoclastic assertion, espoused by some of the articulate May Fourth intellectuals, that Chinese culture – and not just Confucianism but the ideographic language as well – will have to be abolished as a precondition

for China's modernization, is now regarded as completely outdated. Even the most ardent Westernizers in Beijing and Shanghai chose to see their ideas circulate in the Chinese print media. To Chinese intellectuals in industrial East Asia, the awareness that active participation in the economic, political, social, and cultural life of a thoroughly modernized community is not necessarily in conflict with being authentically Chinese implies the possibility that modernization may enhance rather than weaken Chineseness. Still, the meaning of being Chinese is itself undergoing a major transformation.

A recent economic phenomenon with far-reaching political and cultural implications is the great increase in intraregional trade in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the Four Dragons are providing 31 percent of all foreign investments in the countries of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN), the participation of "diaspora" Chinese becomes vitally important; they are now responsible for the largest capital transfer in the region, exceeding that of both Japan and the United States. Just as the public perception of the Chinese in the United States has changed from laundrymen to engineers and professionals, the image of the Chinese as economic beings is likely to be further magnified in South-east Asia, changing perhaps from that of trader to that of financier. The Chinese constitute not only the largest peasantry in the world today but also the most mobile merchant class.²⁹

Despite all these remarkable economic accomplishments in Asia and in the Pacific, the future is filled with uncertainties. As the United States reduces its

26 S. N. Eisenstadt, "Varieties of Political Development: The Theoretical Challenge," in S. N. Eisenstadt and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Building States and Nations: Models and Data Resources*, vol. I (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1973), 41–72; and S. N. Eisenstadt, "Post-Traditional Societies and the Continuity of Reconstruction of Tradition in Post-Traditional Societies," in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Post-Traditional Societies* (New York: Norton, 1974), 1–27.

27 Peter L. Berger, "An East Asian Development Model?" in Peter Berger and Hsin Huang Hsiao, eds., *In Search of an East Asian Development Model*, 3–11.

28 Tu Wei-ming "The Search for Roots in East Asia: The Case of the Confucian Revival," in Martin E. Marty, ed., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

29 See Wang Gungwu, "The Culture of Chinese Merchants," unpublished lecture given at the University of Toronto, October 20, 1989.

budget deficit, it may not be the same catalyst for growth as it was in the 1980s when an American import spree fueled much of the economic expansion of the region. Also, with the advent of a unified European Community in 1992 and its growing preoccupation with Eastern Europe, not to mention the deterioration of the Soviet economy and the present Middle East crisis, the West may well turn its attention away from Asia and the Pacific. Although it is unlikely that a "fortress Europe" or a Western Hemisphere economic zone will quickly push the Asia-Pacific region toward a Japan-anchored trading bloc, the hazards of protectionism in North America are certainly not negligible.

Still, if the projection of a Pacific century is at all credible, the roles of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia ought not to be underestimated. Taiwan, for example, has the distinction of holding the largest foreign reserve in the world (over 70 billion dollars in 1990), surpassing Japan, the United States, and Germany. While this fact alone may not be particularly significant, the combination of government leadership, entrepreneurial ingenuity, and a strong work ethic has made Taiwan, despite its political isolation, an assiduous investor and an innovator in international trade. Taiwanese merchants (predominantly in small and medium industries) are noticeable worldwide; the Nationalist government has made a highly coordinated and strategically sophisticated effort to make Taiwan a valued partner in many joint ventures in a number of key states in North America.

If the Taiwan "economic miracle" has attracted the most attention with the American public, the fascinating and enduring feature of the Taiwan experience has been its conscientious effort

to chart a radically different course of development, deliberately to challenge the socialist experiment on the mainland. As a result, the perceptual gap between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits has been exceedingly wide; despite the rhetoric of unification, the two "countries" have vastly different economic structures, political systems, social conditions, and cultural orientations. The Taiwan independence movement has created perhaps the most controversial and explosive political issue on the island, but the democratization process initiated by the top Nationalist leadership under pressure in 1987 has undoubtedly caught the spirit of the moment. If Taiwan (the Republic of China) becomes truly democratic, the question of Taiwan's Chineseness will inevitably become a matter of public debate. Much attention has recently been focused on what may be called the sedimentations of Taiwanese history. For the intelligentsia, especially those under forty who were born and raised in Taiwan, the recognition that there have been distinctive Dutch, Japanese, and American strata superimposed on the Chinese substratum since the eighteenth century – not to mention the upsurge of nativistic sentiments of the Polynesian aborigines – makes the claim of Taiwan's Chineseness problematic.

Still, the very fact that more than a million Taiwanese residents travel each year to the mainland to sightsee, do business, carry on scholarly communication, and hold family reunions has created a sort of "mainland mania" in the island, compelling the Nationalist government to deal with the mainland question in ways scarcely imagined even a couple of years ago. In late December 1990 the president of Taiwan announced that its state-of-war "emergency" vis-à-vis the mainland will be terminated by

May 1991. This will certainly lead to other astounding activities. Taiwan's official ideological claim to be the true inheritor of Chinese culture has taken a strange turn. In response to the threat of the independence movement, the government deems it advantageous to underscore Taiwan's Chineseness, but the challenge from the mainland prompts it to acknowledge how far Taiwan has already departed from the Sinic world.

The tale of the two cities (Hong Kong and Singapore) is equally fascinating. All indications suggest that the average per capita income in Hong Kong in 1990 had already surpassed that of its colonial ruler, the United Kingdom. The latter, more than Hong Kong, seems to be the principal beneficiary in this two-way investment relationship. Hong Kong's free-market capitalism, ably guided by government-appointed local leaders, exemplifies the "loose-rein" political philosophy characteristic of traditional China. Even though its ruling style is noninterference, its approach to economic affairs is a far cry from laissez-faire as it is traditionally practiced. The role of Hong Kong in international finance and in the development of manufacturing and light industry appropriate to her specific geopolitical and cultural conditions provides an inspiring example for many other developing and developed societies. Lurking behind the scenes, of course, is the overwhelming presence of mainland refugees and their experiences of persecution, loss, escape, renewal, and uncertainty. An estimated 1.5 million Hong Kong residents demonstrated in support of the democracy movement in Beijing in May 1989; with a total population of 5 million, virtually every family was represented in these demonstrations. Hong Kong's concern for and involvement in the affairs of the

homeland cannot be overestimated. For the majority of Hong Kong residents, being Chinese as British subjects is, in human terms, arguably superior to being Chinese as citizens of the People's Republic of China.

The story of Singapore – which in less than two decades emerged from being an endangered entrepôt to become a major industrial center in the Asia-Pacific region in trade, high technology, petroleum, tourism, medicine, and finance – is no less dramatic. The linguistic situation alone offers a clue to the complexity of the human condition. As Ezra Vogel observes, among the 75 percent of the population who are Chinese (15 percent Malays and 7 percent Indians), at least six major groups "who found each others' dialects unintelligible" can be identified; the Chinese lingua franca is now Mandarin which is for Singaporeans a dialect learned in this generation and devoid of deep family-rooted ethnic significance.³⁰ Yet, Singapore as an independent state and a safe society with its own unique blend of cultural eclecticism has endured. Whether or not Singapore is practicing "capitalism with socialist characteristics,"³¹ her success in providing adequate housing, transportation, education, security, and welfare for her citizens clearly indicates that, at least in the economic sphere, her leadership, both governmental and business, has charted a course of action congenial to the Singapore situation.

Because the omnipresence of governmental intervention has transformed Singapore into an administrative state,

30 Ezra Vogel, *The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia*, unpublished manuscript of the 1990 Reischauer Lectures, Harvard University, 73.

31 Statement by one Singapore leader as quoted in Vogel, *ibid.*, 79.

with a tight control of the press, mass media, and public discourse, a stigma attaches to Singapore in the prominent English-speaking newspapers, notably the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. The fact that “the leading business entrepreneurs in Singapore are government bureaucrats”³² and that there appears to be a one-party political system, raises serious doubts about the state’s commitment to democracy. Still, one has the impression that Singapore’s government is efficient and uncorrupt; that the society is fresh and clean; and that the people are healthy and hardworking. In contrast to Hong Kong, Singapore’s Chineseness is not pronounced; indeed, in a certain sense, it is artificially constructed. Despite the obvious fear that any emphasis on Chinese cultural identity will lead to racial disharmony,³³ Singapore is unmistakably a sanitized version of Chinese society. Vogel notes that “if Hong Kong entrepreneurs thought of Singapore as a bit dull and rigid, Singapore leaders thought of Hong Kong as too speculative, decadent, and undisciplined.”³⁴ In any case, both Hong Kong and Singapore have been instrumental in helping to spread the idea of a Pacific century. The Chinese communities in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines are similarly participating in transforming these societies into newly industrial countries.

32 Ibid., 79.

33 For example, the concern over the government’s efforts to boost Mandarin has prompted Singapore’s former foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam, to raise the issue of possible racial disharmony as a result of emphasis on Chineseness. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 24, 1991, 19.

34 Vogel, *The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia*, 82.

The amazing aspect of all these scenarios is the glaring absence of mainland China. For thirty years (1949 – 1979), hostile external conditions and self-imposed isolation made the People’s Republic of China largely irrelevant to the rise of industrial East Asia. In the last decade, as the resumption of tourism, trade, and scholarly exchange thrust new responsibilities upon the Beijing regime, the Chinese intellectual community as well as the official establishment were appalled to discover that while the periphery of the Sinic world was proudly marching toward an Asia-Pacific century, the homeland remained mired in perpetual underdevelopment. Despite the insistence of the Beijing government to define China’s coming of age strictly in terms of the Four Modernizations – agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology – issues of political and social restructuring have been raised and not only by dissidents, but also by intellectuals in state organizations, research institutions, and universities. The “barracks mentality” is no longer tenable.

Although the phenomenon of Chinese culture disintegrating at the center and later being revived from the periphery is a recurring theme in Chinese history, it is unprecedented for the geopolitical center to remain entrenched while the periphery presents such powerful and persistent economic and cultural challenges. Either the center will bifurcate or, as is more likely, the periphery will come to set the economic and cultural agenda for the center, thereby undermining its political effectiveness.

Cultural China can be examined in terms of a continuous interaction among three symbolic universes.³⁵ The first

35 The term “cultural China” (*wenhua zhongguo*) is relatively new. A similar concept “over-

consists of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore – that is, the societies populated predominantly by cultural and ethnic Chinese. The second consists of Chinese communities throughout the world, including a politically significant minority in Malaysia and a numerically negligible minority in the United States. These Chinese, estimated to number from twenty to thirty million, are often referred to by the political authorities in Beijing and Taipei as *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese).³⁶ More recently, however, they tend to define themselves as members of the Chinese “diaspora,” meaning those who have settled in scattered communities of Chinese far from their ancestral homeland. While the Han Chinese constitute an overwhelming majority in each of the four areas in the first symbolic universe, communities of the Chinese diaspora – with the exception of Malaysia already

mentioned – rarely have a population exceeding 3 percent.

The third symbolic universe consists of individuals, such as scholars, teachers, journalists, industrialists, traders, entrepreneurs, and writers, who try to understand China intellectually and bring their conceptions of China to their own linguistic communities. For the last four decades the international discourse on cultural China has unquestionably been shaped by the third symbolic universe more than by the first two combined. Specifically, writings in English and in Japanese have had a greater impact on the intellectual discourse on cultural China than those written in Chinese. For example, Chinese newspapers abroad often quote sources from the *New York Times* and Japan’s *Asahi Shinbun* to enhance their credibility. The highly politicized Chinese media on both sides of the Taiwan Straits have yet to earn their reputation as reliable reporters and authoritative interpreters of events unfolding in their own domain. The situation, however, is rapidly changing. In cultural matters, the *New York Times* may be months out of date; the “River Elegy,” not to mention the so-called cultural fever,³⁷ did not catch the attention of Western journalists until months after it had engulfed the Chinese-speaking world. Japanese reporting also suffers from a lack of a systematic analysis of the cultural landscape. Still, foreign journalists continue to exert an unusually strong influence on the discourse of cultural China. Sinologists in North Amer-

seas China” (*haiwai zhonghua*) was used to designate Chinese communities outside mainland China. Since this term carries the political connotation of a Chinese-style commonwealth encompassing the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, it has generated much controversy on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. I propose adopting the term “cultural China,” applied loosely, and invite the participation of all those trying to understand and bring understanding to China and Chinese culture, thus the idea of an intellectual discourse. See Tu Wei-ming, “‘Wenhua zhongguo’ chutan” (Probing “cultural China”), *The Nineties* (*Jiushi niandai*) 245 (June 1990): 60–61.

36 For scholarly treatment of the subject, see Wang Gungwu, *A Short History of the Nanyang Chinese* (Singapore: Eastern University Press, 1959); Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life, 1850–1898* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965); G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957); and James L. Watson, *Emigration and Chinese Lineage: The Mans in Hong Kong and London* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

37 Although the “River Elegy” had become a major topic of discussion in the Chinese mass media throughout the first and the second symbolic universes in the summer of 1988, with the exception of Fred Wakeman’s thoughtful piece in the *New York Review of Books*, references to the cultural phenomenon in the English-language publications began to appear in the spring of 1989.

ica, Japan, Europe, and even Australia have similarly exercised a great deal of power in determining the scholarly agenda for cultural China as a whole.

This tripartite division of cultural China is problematic. Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore have much more in common with the Chinese diaspora than they do with mainland China. Despite Hong Kong's impending return to its homeland in 1997, an overwhelming majority of the working class as well as the intellectuals, if offered the opportunity, would not choose to identify themselves as citizens of the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong is, at least in spirit, part of the Chinese diaspora. Although the Republic of Singapore is establishing full diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China, Singapore's leaders have had closer contact with the Nationalist government in Taipei than with the Communists in Beijing. Nevertheless, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore are grouped together with mainland China as the first symbolic universe because the life orientation of each of these societies is based in Chinese culture. If we define being Chinese in terms of full participation in the economic, political, and social life of a Chinese community or civilization, the first symbolic universe offers both the necessary and the sufficient condition.

Divergence in economic development, political system, and social organization notwithstanding, the four members of the first symbolic universe share a common ethnicity, language, history, and worldview. To be sure, ethnic awareness has been diluted by the admixture of a variety of races that constitute the generic Han people; linguistic cohesiveness is threatened by the presence of numerous mutually incomprehensible "dialects" (in the case of Singapore, the situation is further confounded by multilingual-

ism); historical consciousness has been undermined by varying interpretations of "Confucian China and its modern fate"³⁸ and, with increasing rapidity, worldviews have been affected by the importation of radically different belief systems. Still, if we view cultural China as being a psychological as well as an economic and a political interchange, then the nature of the interactions between mainland China and Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore is sufficient to group these distinct nations together as integral parts of the first symbolic universe. For the last ten years, the cultural impact that Hong Kong has had on mainland China as a whole – and metropolitan Guangzhou (Canton) and the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in particular – has been profound; the Hong Kong transformation of mainland China is likely to become even more pronounced in the 1990s. The effect on the modernization of China due to the recent participation of Taiwanese and Singaporeans – as scholars, teachers, advisors, traders, journalists, and tourists – indicates clearly that the potential for Taiwanization and Singaporization of selected geographic regions and social strata of the mainland may be realized in the coming decades.

This does not necessarily mean that this perceived convergence will eventually lead to a reintegrated China as a civilization-state. It is more likely that, as the peripheral regions of mainland China become "contaminated" or "polluted" by Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, relative economic prosperity and cultural richness will bring about a measure of political independence. Despite post-Tiananmen speculation about

38 Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

military warlordism, the rise of economic and cultural regionalism seems inevitable. Whether by choice or by default, a significantly weakened center may turn out to be a blessing in disguise for the emergence of a truly functioning Chinese civilization-state. Of course, the destructive power of the center is such that the transformative potential of the periphery can be easily stifled. The unpredictability of the Beijing leadership and the vulnerability of the status quo in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore make the first symbolic universe fluid and a fruitful interaction among its members difficult. In spite of the so-called Middle Kingdom syndrome, a Chinese civilization-state with a variety of autonomous regions or even a loosely structured Chinese federation of different political entities remains a distinct possibility.³⁹

Nevertheless, we are well advised to heed the observation of Lucian Pye who maintains that "China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations," rather "China is a civilization pretending to be a state."⁴⁰ Actually, "the miracle of China has been its astonishing unity." In trying to find an analogy in Western terms, Pye characterizes China of today "as if the Europe of the Roman Empire and of Charlemagne had lasted until this day and were now trying to function as a single nation-state."⁴¹ We may not accept Pye's assertion that "the overpowering obligation felt by Chinese rulers to preserve the unity of their civilization has meant that there could be no com-

promise in Chinese cultural attitudes about power and authority," but his general statement is well taken: "The fact that the Chinese state was founded on one of the world's great civilizations has given inordinate strength and durability to its political culture."⁴² The beguiling phenomenon of China as a civilization-state requires further elucidation.

The idea of the modern state involving power relationships based on competing economic and social interests is anathema to the Chinese cultural elite as well as the Chinese ruling minority. To them, the state – intent on realizing the historical mission to liberate China from threats of imperialist encroachment and the lethargy and stagnation of the feudal past – symbolizes the guardian of a moral order rather than the outcome of a political process. The state's legitimacy is derived from a holistic orthodoxy informed by Sinicized Marxism-Leninism, rather than from operating principles refined by actual political praxis and codified in a legal system. The state's claims on its people are comprehensive and the people's dependence on the state is total; the state exemplifies the civilizational norms for the general public and the leadership assumes ideological and moral authority. The civilization-state exercises both political power and moral influence.

It should be acknowledged, however, that for all her power and influence, China as a civilization-state is often negligible in the international discourse on global human concerns. The marginalization of the Middle Kingdom to the periphery is, by now, so much an accepted fact in the contemporary world that it is virtually taken for granted, even among those of us committed to Chinese studies in the West. The asymme-

39 Yan Jiaqi, as a political scientist, has been a consistent and articulate advocate of a federated China. See notes 3 and 19.

40 Lucian Pye, "China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society," *Foreign Affairs* 69 (4) (Fall 1990): 58.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

try between the centrality of its magnetic pull in cultural China and the marginality of its significance to the “global village” as a whole makes the first symbolic universe a challenging issue for analysis and contemplation.⁴³

The second symbolic universe, the Chinese diaspora, presents equally intriguing conceptual difficulties. Diaspora, which literally means the scattering of seeds, has been used to refer to Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile or to Jews living in a Gentile world. Until the establishment of the modern nation-state of Israel, the saliency of faith in God and its attendant observance of law and ritual, rather than the state, characterized the distinctive features of the Jewish religious community.⁴⁴ In contrast to this, the state, or more precisely China as a civilization-state, features prominently in the Chinese diaspora. Because the Chinese diaspora has never lost its homeland, there is no functional equivalent to the cathartic yearning for Jerusalem. Actually the ubiquitous presence of the Chinese state – its awe-inspiring physical size, its long history, and the numerical weight of its population – continues to loom large in the psychocultural constructs of diaspora Chinese. For many, the state, either Nationalist or Communist, controls the symbolic resources necessary for their cultural identity. Although dual citizenship is no longer operative, both Beijing and Taipei expect the loyal support of their *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese). Few diaspora Chinese ever speculate about

the possibility of China disintegrating as a unified civilization-state. The advantage of being liberated from an obsessive concern for China’s well-being at the expense of their own livelihood is rarely entertained. The diaspora Chinese cherish the hope of returning to and being recognized by the homeland. While the original meaning of scattering seeds suggests taking root and perpetuating away from the homeland, many diaspora Chinese possess a sojourner mentality and lack a sense of permanence in their adopted country. Some return “home” to get married or send their children back for a Chinese education; they remain in touch with relatives and friends who keep them informed of the economic and political climate at home.⁴⁵

The Chinese settlers who are scattered around the world come, historically, from a few well-defined areas along the southeast coast of mainland China – notably Guangdong and Fujian. For a specific group of settlers, the province itself was too extensive and diffuse to accommodate an emotional identification with their homeland. Until the recent waves of immigration to North America which began after 1949, the overwhelming majority of Chinese Americans identified themselves not as Cantonese – which was too cosmopolitan a term to evoke any real sense of rootedness – but as natives of subprovincial districts, such as Taishan, Zhongshan, or Panyu. Similar phenomena occurred in Europe and Southeast Asia. As a rule, mutual aid associations in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia were organized according to county or village, rather than provincial affiliations. Secret societies that crossed local boundaries were either politically

43 I thank sociologist Ambrose King of the Chinese University of Hong Kong for illuminating discussions on this issue.

44 Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

45 For a typical example of these patterns, see Clarence E. Glick, *Sojourners and Settlers: Chinese Migrants in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1980), 172 – 181.

oriented or economically motivated. It is understandable, then, that the Chinese diaspora was, for decades, so fragmented that there was little communication among groups within a host nation, let alone any transnational cooperation.

Nevertheless, despite apparent parochialism, the overseas Chinese have managed to adapt themselves to virtually all types of communities throughout the world. The impression that the overall cultural orientation of Chinese settlers has been shaped predominantly by the magnetic power of the homeland is simplistic. The reason that the overseas Chinese rarely consider themselves thoroughly assimilated in their adopted countries is much more complex. In the United States, racial discrimination against the Chinese was, until recently, blatant; the Chinatown mentality, as a response to the hostile environment, may be seen as a psychosocial defense and adaptation. The post-1949 immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong have developed entirely different patterns of assimilation. The arrival of "boat people" and refugees from the mainland has initiated yet another process where new style Chinatowns emerge in such unlikely places as the deep South and the Midwest in the United States.

The situation in Southeast Asia is radically different. The case of the Philippine Chinese, perhaps the smallest Chinese population of any major Southeast Asian country, merits special attention:

The history of the Chinese in the Philippine population is one of regular intermarriage with ethnic Filipinos and the generation, thereby, of a historically important body of Chinese *mestizos*. When waves of Chinese immigration have receded and the Chinese community was not replenished for a time, these *mestizos* have

flourished in business pursuits. And, as in Thailand, Chinese-Filipino intermarriage has produced, over long periods of time, much of the political, social and cultural leadership of the country.⁴⁶

"In common with most of the rest of Southeast Asia," wrote Edgar Wickberg, "the Philippines has had little replenishment of its Chinese population since 1949." He further notes: "Other things being equal, then, we would expect such a population to be increasingly oriented towards the Philippines and Philippine culture and decreasingly interested in things Chinese."⁴⁷ This seems to be incongruent with the perceived phenomenon that the Chinese in the Philippines, unlike those in Thailand, have not yet been fully assimilated into the mainstream of Filipino society. In fact, their distinct Chineseness makes them vulnerable to nativistic assaults. Wickberg explains that, prior to 1975, "the Philippine policy of restricting certain occupations to citizens but making it difficult for Chinese to become citizens put the Chinese in an almost impossible situation."⁴⁸ It appears, therefore, that the push of local conditions as well as the pull of the homeland impels the Chinese to become unassimilable.

The story is complicated by the fact that Chinese-Filipino relations also figure prominently in determining the fate of the Chinese settlers in the Philippines. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s when the Nationalist government in Taiwan exerted profound influence in

46 Edgar Wickberg, "Some Comparative Perspectives on Contemporary Chinese Ethnicity in the Philippines," *Yazhou wenhua (Asian Culture)* (forthcoming), 5 (page numbers refer to his May 1989 manuscript).

47 Ibid., 5–6.

48 Ibid., 7.

the Philippines, "the Philippine government, on the whole, gave over to Taiwan the responsibility for defining the nature of the Chinese culture to be taught in the Philippine Chinese schools."⁴⁹ As part of the united front between the Nationalist government and the Marcos regime to fight the spread of communism, Chinese schools were allowed to fly the flag of the Republic of China, to display pictures of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, and to make use of textbooks from Taiwan. The recognition of Beijing in 1975 facilitated the Filipinization of the Chinese schools and prompted the Marcos government to grant full citizenship to about one-sixth of the entire Chinese population in the Philippines.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign was the approach of the newly established intellectual organization Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, which advocated "the understanding and retention of one's Chinese culture while fully identifying oneself with the Philippines and with Filipinos of non-Chinese backgrounds."⁵⁰ Conceived in the 1970s by young university graduates of Chinese ancestry, the Kaisa vision intends to create a narrow ridge between cultural chauvinism and total assimilation. One of the most threatening issues confronting the Filipino-Chinese community is its public perception; although the Chinese are beneficiaries of the political and economic system, their contribution to social welfare is limited and their participation in the cultural life of the land is minimal. The resentment the local population feels toward the conspicuous consumption of the rich Chinese (for example, elaborate tombs in the style of miniature world-class hotels), which has often led to anti-Chinese riots

49 Ibid., 9.

50 Ibid., 21.

against the peddlers and retailers in Chinatowns in the past, remains a haunting memory.

The precarious nature of being Chinese in Southeast Asia is amply demonstrated by the institutionalized mechanism of desinification in Malaysia and Indonesia. For political reasons, the Malaysian and Indonesian governments consider Chineseness a potential threat to national security, not to mention national integration. Among the most tragic events in the second half of the twentieth century were the atrocities committed against the Chinese population in Indonesia in 1965, which were brought on by a perceived threat of Communist takeover. Between 250,000 and 750,000 people died in a matter of months, due, in part, to a coup d'état engineered by President Suharto. This Indonesian Chinese "holocaust" received little attention in the first symbolic universe of cultural China. The mainland was embroiled in its own holocaust, the Cultural Revolution; Taiwan condoned the heavy-handed attack on Communism; Hong Kong was too remote to be affected; and Singapore's proximity to Indonesia – both geographically and politically – made it too vulnerable to offer a response. It was actually in the same period that growing anti-Chinese sentiment in Malaysia pushed Singapore to become an independent state.

The second symbolic universe, the Chinese diaspora, was too fragmented and isolated to even take notice of the tragedy. Malaysian Chinese, Thai Chinese, Philippine Chinese, and American Chinese were aware of what happened, but there was neither the infrastructure nor the resources to mount a transnational demonstration. In fact, the word *Chinese* qualified by *Malaysian*, *Thai*, *Philippine*, and *American* did not signify any underlying consciousness of ethnic

or cultural identity; these terms were used generically to designate communities that were culturally and racially similar, but which were otherwise totally unrelated. It is ironic that it was the third symbolic universe – consisting primarily of non-Chinese but who were committed, informed, and often sympathetic observers of things Chinese – that reacted most strongly to the holocaust and exposed it to the world at large.

Recent events have greatly improved the atmosphere for the Chinese in Southeast Asia, although the “Chinese question” continues to be a sensitive subject. Still, in Malaysia and Indonesia, being Chinese remains a stigma; things Chinese – especially symbols of Chinese high culture such as the written script – are viewed with suspicion. The economic success of the Chinese makes them hungry for cultural expression, and the host countries, while tolerating their economic well-being, are adamant about imposing cultural prohibitions. Signs of a Kaisa-like solution to the conflict between the political loyalty and the cultural identity of Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia are yet to be found.

After having been ostracized from the diplomatic community of ASEAN for more than a decade, Taiwan is now returning as an investment giant. Records show that Taiwanese investments in the Philippines and Malaysia have taken the lead and now surpass those of Japan by a respectable margin. Taiwan’s presence in Indonesia is significant enough to have persuaded the Suharto government to relax its prohibition against Chinese schools, Chinese videocassettes, and publications in Chinese, which inspires a new vitality in Indonesian Chinese communities. Furthermore, operating with the full collaboration of merchants of Chinese origin in Bangkok, Taiwanese capital has also contributed to the eco-

nomic dynamism in Thailand. An obvious consequence for the second symbolic universe is the latent tension and visible conflict between Taiwan’s economic strength and the mainland’s political clout. The drama of the competition between the mainland and Taiwan is not confined to the ASEAN countries; the intensity is felt by Chinese communities in Tokyo, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, and Sydney. Although it is too early to tell whether a depoliticized cultural agenda will emerge as a result of this confrontation, it seems that Singapore may play a vital role in addressing economic and cultural issues and transcend the political animosity which exists on both sides of the Taiwan Straits.

Another example of the impact of the first symbolic universe on the second is the emigration of professionals from Hong Kong to North America and Australia. As 1997 draws near, Hong Kong emigrants with substantial capital and professional expertise are making their presence known in Chinese communities in Toronto, Vancouver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Sydney. This seems symptomatic of a broader pattern: Chinese immigrants in these cities are also coming from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. What we are witnessing, then, is a new era of the Chinese diaspora.

This phenomenon which historian Wang Gungwu, vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University, aptly depicts as a remigration of Chinese to North America, Europe, and Australia, is unprecedented and requires closer examination.⁵¹

⁵¹ Remarks by Wang Gungwu at the conference on “The Meaning of Being Chinese,” East-West Center, October 24 – 26, 1990. See conference proceedings, Institute of Culture and Communication, East-West Center, Honolulu.

These financially secure Malaysian, Indonesian, Filipino, and Vietnamese Chinese have ostensibly emigrated from their adopted homelands for several generations in order to escape from policies which discriminated against their Chineseness. In order to combat the pressure to assimilate imposed by the new nation-states in Southeast Asia and to preserve a measure of Chineseness for their descendants, they have opted to immigrate to modern Western-style nations with strong democratic traditions. The irony of not returning to their ancestral homeland but going far away from China with the explicit intention of preserving their cultural identity seems perplexing, but as Wang Gungwu perceptively remarks, the transformation from a sojourner mentality to deliberate emigration is a new phenomenon.

As recently as the 1960s, the decision to renounce Chinese nationality (whether Nationalist or Communist) and to adopt local citizenship was, for many Chinese in the diaspora, a matter of great agony.⁵² The massive exodus of the most brilliant Chinese intellectuals from the mainland during the last decade shows clearly that the civilization-state has lost much of its iron grip on the Chinese intelligentsia, and the Tiananmen brutality may have irreversibly severed the emotional attachment of the diaspora Chinese to the homeland. The meaning of being Chinese, a question that has haunted Chinese intellectuals for at least three generations, has taken on entirely new dimensions.

The term *cultural China*, coined in the last decade or so and often seen in intellectual journals outside mainland China, is itself an indication of the emergence of a "common awareness" (*gongshi*)

⁵² Ibid.

among Chinese intellectuals throughout the world. The presence of such an awareness prior to the opening up of mainland China in the late 1970s is made clear in the deliberate choice of *huaren* (people of Chinese origin) rather than *zhongguoren* (people of China, the state) to designate people of a variety of nationalities who are ethnically and culturally Chinese. *Huaren* is not geopolitical-ly centered, for it indicates a common ancestry and a shared cultural background, while *zhongguoren* necessarily evokes obligations and loyalties of political affiliation and the myth of the Middle Kingdom. By emphasizing cultural roots, Chinese intellectuals in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North America hoped to build a transnational network for understanding the meaning of being Chinese within a global context. For these intellectuals, the relevant political center that influenced their lives was the Nationalist government in Taiwan. Their efforts to depoliticize the cultural movement were an attempt to maintain a critical distance from the official anti-Communist line of the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party).

In the 1980s, with the advent of mainland China as an active participant in the discourse on cultural China, the symbol of *huaren* assumed a new significance: how could the overseas Chinese help the homeland to modernize? On the intellectual side, an unintended consequence of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms was "cultural fever," brought on by a revival of communication in the social sciences and humanities between scholars in mainland China and scholars abroad. The Tiananmen tragedy on June 4, 1989, symbolizes the near-total alienation of the Chinese intelligentsia from the ruling minority on the mainland. It is highly unlikely that the political regime that has brutally massacred peaceful demon-

strators and bystanders will ever be able to win back the hearts and minds of the intellectuals and those citizens who are committed to the dignity of China as a civilization.

The fate of the Chinese intelligentsia in the People's Republic of China inevitably elicits the horrifying question, How could the scholar, honored as a paradigm of the personality ideal in Chinese culture, have stooped so low for so long? The answer lies, in part, in the coexistence of political nationalism and cultural iconoclasm among the most articulate intellectual elite. The decline of China from being the Middle Kingdom for centuries to the "Sickman of East Asia" in just two generations time (beginning with the Opium War of 1839 and culminating in the collapse of the Hundred-Day reform in 1898), in conjunction with the disintegration of the Chinese political order, created such spiritual turmoil among the Chinese intelligentsia that the reconstruction of a political center became an overriding concern. Intent on creating the optimum conditions for China to recapture its position of wealth and power once again, the Westernized intellectuals launched a frontal attack on Confucian tradition: Confucianism was perceived to have nurtured a "national character" (*guominxing*) detrimental to China's modernization. The desire to increase China's chance of survival was therefore linked to an all-out attack on the very tradition which had shaped Chineseness throughout history.

This assertion – that we must totally reject that which has made us what we are – enabled the most forward-looking Chinese intellectuals to be receptive to foreign ideologies while still maintaining their nationalistic objectives. The May Fourth patriots experienced a keen sense of liberation when they confronted the national crisis by embracing vir-

tually all major Western philosophical currents of thought, including Dewey's pragmatism, Bergson's vitalism, Bakunin's anarchism, and Russell's empiricism. What was conspicuously absent was any persuasive form of fundamentalism or nativism that glorified Chinese culture for its own sake. However, beneath this intellectual commitment to alien Western values was a powerful surge of fundamentalistic and nativistic sentiment which was dangerously volatile among the Chinese populace throughout the country.

An unintentional and unfortunate consequence of this period of wholesale Westernization and anti-Confucianism was the marginalization of the intelligentsia from the center of the political arena. The thrust of their intellectual quest was the establishment of a political center; yet such a focus relegated them to the background. Furthermore, their demand for action was so overwhelming that the seeds of their own decline were embedded in the logic of the intellectual discourse. It is not surprising that Marxism-Leninism triumphed in the marketplace of ideologies; it met the requirements of both the cultural iconoclasts and political nationalists: it was Western to the core as the cultural iconoclasts had strongly recommended and its anti-imperialist stance was precisely what the political nationalists had demanded.

What the Chinese intelligentsia did not expect – and is still struggling to understand – is that the Party is not only the embodiment of socialist truth but also the bearer of the correct method for its eventual realization. The actual struggle undertaken by the masses (the peasants, the workers, and the soldiers) was too rooted in Chinese soil to benefit from the sophisticated intellectual consciousness framed in Western liber-

al democratic terms. The rise of Mao Zedong to the trinity of political leader, ideological teacher, and moral exemplar, though unprecedented in Chinese history, can be explained in terms of a fundamentalistic-nativistic challenge to the Westernization process as envisioned by the May Fourth intellectuals. In examining Mao Zedong's ideology we find, among other things, a combination of iconoclasm and nationalism; however, the iconoclasm is layered with numerous sediments of nativistic pathos, and the nationalism is imbued with fundamentalistic claims to China's uniqueness. Since his death, Chinese intellectuals may have radically changed their minds about Mao as the savior of the Chinese people, but for decades they were awed by his sagacity and, occasionally, charmed by his earthiness. The demonic power of destruction, which Mao unleashed repeatedly, stunned intellectuals to such a degree that they lost their ability even to describe it. Indeed, they have yet to develop adequate conceptual apparatuses to analyze that phenomenon, including their own roles as participants (willing or otherwise) and as victims.

Collective amnesia is so pervasive in China that the national memory has difficulty extending back even to the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), let alone to the disaster of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) or the brutality of the Anti-Rightist campaign (1957–1958). Virtually all intellectuals of note were purged during the Anti-Rightist campaign that followed the short-lived domestic liberalization in the wake of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union. The Great Leap Forward – an ill-conceived utopian experiment intended to enable China to surpass the West in industrial productivity within fifteen years – in combination

with natural disasters led to massive starvation, killing an estimated 40 million people. Subsequently, neither the Party, nor the leadership, nor Mao was held accountable. In fact, Mao, disgusted with the inertia of the leadership and the bureaucratism of the Party, managed to rouse the Chinese youth to a crescendo of iconoclasm and nationalism by launching the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Yet, as some of the most perceptive minds in China have confessed, their faith in the truth of Marxism-Leninism, in the credibility of the Chinese Communist leadership, and in the legitimacy of the Party was not shaken until the mid-1980s.

In the spring of 1990, Chinese intellectuals worldwide developed a truly new, communal, critical self-consciousness in which the agenda of iconoclasm and nationalism was reversed; a search for cultural roots and a commitment to a form of depoliticized humanism became a strong voice in the discourse on cultural China.

China has witnessed much destructiveness and violence in her modern transformation. The agonizing question for us all in the three symbolic universes is raised with great poignancy by Stevan Harrell: "Why does a culture that condemns violence, that plays down the glory of military exploits, awards its highest prestige to literary, rather than martial figures, and seeks harmony over all other values, in fact display such frequency and variety of violent behavior, that is of the use of physical force against persons?"⁵³ Echoing Harrell's

53 Stevan Harrell, "Introduction," in Jonathan N. Lipman and Stevan Harrell, eds., *Violence in China: Essays in Culture and Counterculture* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 1990), 1. Harrell adds, "Whether Chinese culture is more violent than other cultures is dif-

puzzlement and frustration, Andrew Nathan, in a thought-provoking review essay, cites the condemnation of the authors of the aforementioned "River Elegy": "What Confucian culture has given us over the past several thousand years is not a national spirit of enterprise, a system of laws, or a mechanism of cultural renewal, but a fearsome self-killing machine that, as it degenerated, constantly devoured its best and its brightest, its own vital elements."⁵⁴ This is reminiscent of Lu Xun's bitter satire against the Confucian legacy, which he mordantly denounced as cannibalistic ritualism.⁵⁵

In retrospect, what the Chinese intelligentsia collectively experienced in the twentieth century is what Mark Elvin pointedly characterizes as the "double disavowal" of both Confucianism and Marxism.⁵⁶ The same indignation that Lu Xun's generation felt about Confucian authoritarianism is now being expressed against Marxist totalitarian-

ism. Many intellectuals strongly believe that the collusion of the feudal past and the socialist present makes China a victim of a double betrayal. This, in a substantial way, explains the vehemence with which the authors of the "River Elegy" attacked the Confucian legacy and the enthusiasm they had for embracing the modern West. The matter, however, is complicated by the fact that the real challenge to the mainland Chinese intellectuals is not the modern West per se but the modern West mediated through industrial East Asia.

While Lu Xun's generation, despite Spengler's warning, never entertained the possibility of a path to modernity other than Westernization, the authors and producers of the "River Elegy" could not help but explore the courses of action most congenial to the Chinese situation. If Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Chinese communities throughout the world have shown not only the relevance of Confucian ethics to their *modus operandi* but also the dynamics of the Confucian tradition in shaping their forms of life, then the existential predicament of the mainland intellectual caught between a contemptible past and a brutal present is not indissoluble. Notwithstanding that "the inner strength of the Chinese intelligentsia has been sapped by the collusion of feudal Chinese traditionalism (the remnants of a politicized Confucian moralism) and the modern Western collectivism (the outmoded practice of Leninist dictatorship),"⁵⁷ the fruitful interaction between Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism in cultural China has already occurred. The authors and producers of the "River

icult to judge, but it is visibly not less violent than many."

54 Quoted in Andrew J. Nathan, "A Culture of Cruelty," *The New Republic* 203 (5) (July 30 – August 6, 1990): 32.

55 Lu Hsun, "Suigan lu sanshiba" (Random thoughts, no. 38), *Xin qingnian* (*The New Youth*) 5 (5) (November 15, 1918): 515–518. For an analysis of Lu Xun's "complex consciousness," see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

56 Mark Elvin, "The Double Disavowal: The Attitudes of Radical Thinkers to the Chinese Tradition," in Y. M. Shaw, ed., *China and Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Taipei: Institute of International Relations, 1986), 112–137. For his more recent view on the extinction of Confucianism, see Mark Elvin, "The Collapse of Scriptural Confucianism," *Papers on Far Eastern History*, no. 41 (Canberra: The Australian National University, March 1990).

57 Tu Wei-ming, "Iconoclasm, Holistic Vision, and Patient Watchfulness: A Personal Reflection on the Modern Chinese Intellectual Quest," *Dædalus* 116 (2) (Spring 1987): 94.

Elegy," some now as scholars in exile, have also begun to explore traditional symbolic resources (including those in Confucian humanism) in order to reformulate their strategy for China's cultural reconstruction.⁵⁸

The so-called Third Epoch of Confucian Humanism⁵⁹ may have been the wishful thinking of a small coterie of academicians, but the emergence of a new inclusive humanism with profound ethical-religious implications for the spiritual self-definition of humanity, the sanctity of the earth, and a form of religiousness based on immanent transcendence has already been placed on the agenda in cultural China. The real challenge to this new inclusive humanism is the narrowly conceived anthropocentricity informed by instrumental rationality and fueled by a Faustian drive to conquer and destroy. While the modern West has created virtually all major spheres of value for the twentieth century (science, technology, the free market, democratic institutions, metropolises, and mass communication, for example), the painful realization that it has also pushed humanity to the brink of self-destruction engenders much food for thought. The question of whether human beings are, in fact, a viable species is now being asked with a great sense of urgency.

It is ironic that, for the first half of the century, a major concern for the Chinese political leaders – notably Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Mao Zedong – was

58 Su Xiaokang, "Traditional Resources and Modernization: A Talk with Professor Tu Wei-ming in Paris," *Minzhu Zhongguo (Democratic China)* 1 (2) (June 1990): 52–55.

59 Tu Wei-ming, "Toward a Third Epoch of Confucian Humanism: A Background Understanding," in Irene Eber, ed., *Confucianism: Dynamics of Tradition* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 3–21.

the very survival of the children of the Yellow Emperor. The fear, far from that of a population explosion, was actually the depletion of the Chinese race in the social Darwinian sense. With a view toward the future we need to ask, what form of life do the Chinese need to pursue that is not only commensurate with human flourishing but also sustainable in ecological and environmental terms?

What mainland China eventually will become remains an overriding concern for all intellectuals in cultural China. She may try to become a mercantilist state with a vengeance; she may continue to be mired in her inertia and inefficiency for years to come; or she may modernize according to a new holistic humanist vision. Saddled with a population burden approaching 1.2 billion, can this state succeed at any of these ambitions without first finding a viable way to liberate the energies of its people? Although realistically, those who are on the periphery (the second and third symbolic universes plus Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) are seemingly helpless in affecting any fundamental transformation of China proper, the center no longer has the ability, insight, or legitimate authority to dictate the agenda for cultural China. On the contrary, the transformative potential of the periphery is so great that it seems inevitable that it will significantly shape the intellectual discourse on cultural China for years to come. It is perhaps premature to announce that "the center is nothing, whereas the periphery is everything,"⁶⁰ but undeniably, the fruitful interaction among a va-

60 Professor Yu Ying-shih of Princeton, perhaps in jest, proposed this as the theme of his essay. If his schedule had permitted him to write a paper for the present volume, he would have underscored the intellectual and political significance of the periphery in cultural China.

riety of economic, political, social, and cultural forces at work along the periphery will activate the dynamics of cultural China.

The exodus of many of the most brilliant minds from the mainland, the emigration of Chinese professionals from Hong Kong, and the remigration of middle-class Chinese from Southeast Asia to North America and Australia suggest that it is neither shameful nor regrettable to voluntarily alienate oneself from a political regime that has become culturally insensitive, publicly unaccountable, and oppressive to basic human rights. The meaning of being Chinese is basically not a political question; it is a human concern pregnant with ethical-religious implications.

Is it possible to live a meaningful life as a Chinese individual if the dignity of one's humanity is lost? Does citizenship of a Chinese national state guarantee one's Chineseness? As a precondition for maintaining one's Chineseness, is it necessary to become a full participating citizen of one's adopted country? While the overseas Chinese (the second symbolic universe) may seem forever peripheral to the meaning of being Chinese, can they assume an effective role in creatively constructing a new vision of Chineseness that is more in tune with Chinese history and in sympathetic resonance with Chinese culture? Is it possible and even desirable for someone in the third symbolic universe who is not proficient in the Chinese language and who has no Chinese family ties by birth or marriage to acquire an understanding of Chinese culture such that he or she can greatly shape the intellectual discourse on cultural China and significantly contribute to the definition of being Chinese? An obvious no to the first two and a resounding yes to each of the remaining questions will give rich tex-

ture to the provocative inquiry into the meaning of being Chinese.

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*Cultural
China:
the periph-
ery as the
center*