



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Pride and Loathing in History

Shu, C.

Citation

Shu, C. (2013, September 4). *Pride and Loathing in History*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21638>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21638>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/21638> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Shu, Chunyan

Title: Pride and loathing in history : the national character discourse and the Chinese search for a cultural identity

Issue Date: 2013-09-04

Chapter 1. Introduction

China strives to present a positive national image, with increasing stress on the peaceful and harmonious nature of its culture. However, when the efforts to build such an image meet with critical international response, nationalistic sentiments rise to the surface as “Chinese people’s feelings are hurt”. Such an expression, often voiced by the country’s diplomats, spokespersons and mainstream media, represents more than an official rhetoric; behind it lies a sense of wounded pride that can only be understood in a wider context. In fact, wounded pride is a recurring theme in Chinese popular culture, as well as a common topic in Chinese cultural and historical critiques of Western cultural hegemony.

Many China-watchers in recent years have observed an increasingly assertive Chinese emphasis on the nation’s particular history and culture, both at home and abroad. Consequently, outside the country, the fear of the awakening of a global power has raised concerns over a rising nationalism of an aggressive, even revengeful, nature. With its negative connotation of being dangerous and irrational, the wounded pride as manifested in Chinese nationalism has been the subject of growing international speculation. While nationalism as a worldwide phenomenon has also been recognized as “a profound and natural need” for the humiliated, the oppressed, and the newly “decolonized” to respond to their collective injustice, representing “the straightening of bent backs”,¹ in the case of Chinese nationalism, a linkage to memories of collective humiliation in modern history makes it seem more threatening than nationalism elsewhere.²

In the meantime, the wounded pride has become entangled with, as Geremie Barmé put it, a widespread and powerful “modern tradition of self-loathing” in Chinese

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Bent Twig: A Note on Nationalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1972), pp. 11-30: 30.

² See, for example, James Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 27 (1992), pp. 97-130. Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (California: The University of California Press, 2004). Rana Mitter, “Old Ghosts, New Memories: China’s Changing War History in the Era of Post-Mao Politics,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 38 (1) (2003), pp. 117-131. Rana Mitter, “Modernity, Internationalization, and War in the History of Modern China,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 48, 2 (2005), pp. 523-543.

nationalism.³ The 1980s saw an outright attack on traditional culture, for example, in the television series *River Elegy (He Shang)*, which attributed the country's late-developing status to the agrarian culture and the very nature of its people. Such self-criticism, and even self-negation, was supported by a simplified image of stronger and better Western cultures coupled with a much-desired Western-style modernization.

In the 1990s and beyond, continuous economic growth has been accompanied by revived interests and confidence in traditional culture. The re-emergence of National Learning (*guo xue*) at research and educational institutions has signified a Confucian revival, which has been boosted by increased attention from the country's mass media and popular discourse. Yet such a return to tradition has also seen, in its opposite, the tendency of self-loathing coming into play in Chinese self-perceptions: the turn of the 21st century has witnessed the interesting phenomenon of a Confucian revival running parallel to the critiques of national character that attribute the nation's many problems to its cultural characteristics and eventually to Confucianism.

More intriguingly, in the years between 1991 and 2010, an English language book, *Chinese Characteristics*,⁴ was translated and reprinted in fourteen different editions in mainland China.⁵ It was originally published in 1894 by the American missionary Arthur Smith, in which he described and criticized many aspects of Chinese culture. A century later, despite its 19th century racial and religious antagonisms, the book has curiously joined many other publications that constitute a Chinese cultural critique and has become part of the nation's self-loathing undercurrent.

³ Geremie Barmé, "To Screw Foreigners Is Patriotic: China's Avant-Garde Nationalists," *The China Journal*, No. 34 (1995), p. 222.

⁴ Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Revell, 1894). Smith first published a series of articles in *Zilin XiBao* 字林西报, which were later compiled and published as a book.

⁵ These fourteen editions in Chinese include: 1). 吴湘川、王清淮译, 《中国人的性格》, 延吉: 延边大学出版社, 1991年。2). 张梦阳、王丽娟译, 《中国人的气质》, 甘肃敦煌文艺出版社, 1995年。3). 乐爱国, 张华玉译, 《中国人的性格》, 北京: 学苑出版社, 1998年。4). 匡雁鹏译, 《中国人的特性》, 北京: 光明日报出版社, 1998年。5). 秦悦译, 《中国人的素质》, 上海: 学林出版社, 2001年。6). 林欣译, 《中国人的素质》, 京华出版社, 2002年。7). 舒扬、舒宁、穆稀译, 《典型的中国人—文明与陋习》, 书海出版社, 2004年。8). 《中国人德行》, 北京: 新世界出版社, 2005年。9). 佚名译, 黄兴涛校注, 《中国人的气质》, 北京: 中华书局, 2006年8月。10). 姚锦榕译, 《中国人的德行》, 北京: 中国和平出版社, 2006年10月。11). 刘文飞、刘晓旸译, 《中国人的气质》, 上海三联书店, 2007年11月。12). 陈新峰译, 《中国人的德行》, 北京: 金城出版社, 2008年10月。13). 王续然译, 《中国人的性情》, 北京: 长征出版社, 2009年。14). 李明良译, 《中国人的性格》, 西安: 陕西师范大学出版社, 2010年3月。

The twists and turns in attitude towards Chinese culture and tradition suggest an entanglement of pride and loathing in self-perceptions, which is critical to the understanding of contemporary China. In his book *China: the Pessoptimist Nation*, William Callahan argues that the country's "national aesthetic" entailed the combination of "a superiority complex" and "an inferiority complex".⁶ Jing Wang also contends that the superiority and inferiority complex is a lasting mentality in intellectual reflections of the nation's place in history and in the world.⁷ Such a "bipolar personality" is often manifested in Chinese image presentation towards the outside world; and the emotional dynamics reflect deeply-felt uncertainties in the contemporary search for a cultural identity.

Whether a particular cultural identity can be found, or constructed, is an important question that requires theoretical studies beyond the scope of the present research. However, there is no doubt that, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as the revolutionary ideology fades away, an identity crisis has begun to re-surface. The state and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) are confronted with the fact that political communications have become increasingly irrelevant,⁸ and market forces and popular culture have started to compete with the formerly tightly controlled propaganda mechanisms in the formation of perceptions of the nation and its place in the world. Against this background, it is not surprising that the question of a new cultural identity resorts to the historical and cultural distinctiveness perceived as embodied in the country's many traditions, among which Confucianism is the most remarkable.

Therefore, the return of Confucianism to the spotlight should be understood in relation with efforts to forge a truly authentic, distinctive and modern (inter)national image in order to deal with the identity crisis and the quest for a stronger cultural presence globally.⁹ Yet these efforts seem to have been stretched towards the two extremes of

⁶ William Callahan, *China: the Pessoptimist Nation* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.

⁷ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 134-136.

⁸ Stefan Landsberger, "Propaganda Posters in the Reform Era: Promoting Patriotism or Providing Public Information?" in Columbus, F. (ed.), *Asian Economic and Political Issues*, Volume 10 (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2004), pp. 27-57: 27.

⁹ See, for example, Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim (ed.), *China's Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca, NY [etc.]: Cornell University Press, 1993). Yingjie Guo, *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China: the Search for National Identity Under Reform* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).

either a quintessential outlook or cultural xenophilia.

Indeed, the sense of confidence and pride is expressed in the pursuit of, for example, a “China model” that challenges the universality of a Western neo-liberal-democratic model; and it seems to have been verified by the speculation within Western discourse of a “Beijing consensus” to replace the “Washington consensus”.¹⁰ However, it is open to question whether a model of economic development, even if it proves to be successful, is able to satisfy the pride seen as being wounded during “the century of humiliation”. Similarly, the reappearance of critiques of the national character poses a question as to whether revived interests in Confucianism and cultural tradition in general are able to overcome the self-loathing of a late-developing nation.

Taking into account the country’s growing economic and political might, the more puzzling question is why contemporary Chinese self-perceptions seem to be swaying between the two ends of pride and loathing. In order to answer the “why” question, one has to first ask the “what” and “how” question: what has caused the cultural tradition to be perceived as so loathsome that it has given rise to the “modern tradition” of self-loathing? And what are the responses towards such a tendency in self-perceptions and the search for a cultural identity? Furthermore, how does the tension among various self-perceptions interact with Western perceptions of China?

These are undoubtedly intricate questions that invite answers from many different perspectives, and each question requests careful studies that take into account its social, political, economic and cultural dimensions. To shed light on these questions, the present research will focus on one crucial element in contemporary Chinese cultural critiques, that is, the discourse of the Chinese national character, and use it as an entry point to the understanding of Chinese self-perceptions.

1.1. “Whither China?”: A Cultural Question and the Intellectual Answers

Contemporary Chinese self-perceptions in this research refer to perceptions in the reform era, covering the period since the late 1970s until the present. However, as with all contemporary issues, self-perceptions of today have to be understood in their historical context. The cultural movements of the 1980s, generally seen by their participants and observers as “the second enlightenment”, point to the May Fourth

¹⁰ Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004).

Movement in early 20th century as “the first enlightenment”. Contemporary critiques of the national character almost always refer back to the national character reforms proposed by Liang Qichao and Lu Xun in the late Qing (1644-1911) and early Republican (1912-1949) periods, directing us back to the cultural debates of a century ago. Therefore, a historical dimension has to be introduced to the study of the contemporary discourse.

Among contending visions across a wide cultural spectrum, the perceptions of intellectuals (*zhishi fenzi*), as this study argues, play a critical role in the formation of cultural identities. The intelligentsia as a social group actively engages in cultural dialogues by means of informing, and at the same time responding to, both the state and the general public. This role, though not unusual for intellectuals elsewhere, is particularly prominent for Chinese intellectuals. As John Fairbank puts it, it is “a highly strategic group” with the whole Chinese world providing the context of its thought,¹¹ which in return bridges official rhetoric with popular discourse.

Such a strategic role of intellectuals is characterised by a strong sense of responsibility, even moral obligation, towards society, which is inherited from the traditional Confucian scholar-official. Intellectuals of today certainly differ in many ways from the imperial scholar-official, for example, in their relations with the state,¹² yet, to borrow Tu Weiming’s description, they are very much present in cultural spheres for being at least “politically concerned, socially engaged, and culturally sensitive”¹³. They were the leading figures in the “high culture fever” in the 1980s, introducing and assimilating Western thought to a society newly-opened to Euro-American influence;¹⁴ they initiated the debate on “the humanistic spirit” (*renwen jingshen*) in the 1990s, drawing attention to the far-reaching consequences of commercialization and globalization.

¹¹ John K. Fairbank, *Chinese Thought and Institutions* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 29.

¹² See Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China: A Narrative History* (New York: Free Press, 1981).

¹³ Tu Weiming, “Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality: The Humanistic Spirit in the 21st Century,” Keynote speech on May 29, 2007 at the APRU (Association of Pacific Rim Universities) Forum, Zhejiang University.

¹⁴ Fong-ching Chen, “The Popular Culture Movement of the 1980s,” in Gloria Davies (ed.), *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 71-86. Zha Jianying 查建英, *Bashi Niandai Fangtan Lu* 八十年代访谈录 (Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 2006).

All these features have placed intellectuals at the forefront of Chinese-Western cultural exchanges, and compelled them to reevaluate the nation's past and present in relation to other nations while asking the question of "Where is China going?" that raises deep concerns. Thus, it is justified to say that their roles in the search for a cultural identity, endowed both by themselves and by society at large, are as critical as can be. However, their perceptions of Chinese culture and its place in the world remain neglected in the English language world, and their voices have "rarely reached the West without much reduction or mediation".¹⁵

To probe into this rather important yet unknown field, this study examines contemporary scholarly opinions about the concept of national character to reveal their perceptions of traditional culture, and their visions for a new cultural identity. To be more specific, through the discourse of national character, this study explores how its meaning is borrowed by cultural critics to promote their visions of a truly modern China, and more importantly, how such attempts are rejected by many others who perceive the national character as well as the nation's future outside such a framework.

This study relies on texts of intellectuals—monographs and academic articles—that touch upon the question of cultural identity, with a particular focus on their views of the national character. This leads us to intellectuals in the humanities, especially in the field of history and philosophy, based at universities or research institutes. Obviously, a much wider cultural circle outside these institutions is also involved in the discourse of national character. Therefore, important literature from cultural critics outside intellectual institutions are studied as well.

Because the concept of national character does not fall into a specific academic discipline or research category per se, the texts on the national character are scattered, and as such, selected from a wide range of publications. To support the textual analysis, in-depth interviews have been conducted wherever necessary and possible in order to bring these material into focus and provide up-to-date scholarly opinions on the subject.

¹⁵ Wang Chaohua, "Introduction: Minds of the Nineties," in idem. (ed.), *One China, Many Paths* (London [etc.]: Verso, 2003), pp. 9-45: 10.

1.2. The National Character Discourse

The concept of national character is employed by its observers and critics to refer to certain distinctive features of a national culture. These features are often personified, simplified and generalized to capture the behavioral and thought patterns as well as preferences perceived as almost racially inherent. It indicates an enduring essence that has evolved through a long and shared national history, which not only influences but also transcends political, economic, and social developments. In many cases, it is believed to be at the very root of a nation's cultural and political life, closely linked to its tradition and psychological make-up.

At the same time, the concept of national character entails a certain distinctiveness to a nation and/or a culture, as it is comprised of particular characteristics shared by people within a nation, and distinguishes them from other nations and peoples.¹⁶ It is in this sense that the question of national character is closely linked to nationalism; in fact, it is viewed as part of the historical and cultural foundation of nationalism.¹⁷ Based on such an understanding, one might discover that the discourse of national character, though not necessarily articulated with the same terminology or clarity, plays a crucial role in the perceptions and imaginations of a nation that is viewed as one particular socio-cultural entity among many different others.¹⁸ In short, this discourse is very much present in the formation and development of a national and/or cultural identity.

It has to be noted that the concept of national character is never innocent or value-free. On the contrary, it can often be normative and even judgemental. Historically, the study of national character came into being as anthropological and sociological researches of the “native” or the colonized people. Viewed in the light of Western imperialist expansion around the globe, the subject of such studies—in this case a nation or a

¹⁶ For a typical example, see Cumberland Clark, *Shakespeare and National Character: A Study of Shakespeare's Knowledge and Dramatic Literary Use of the Distinctive Racial Characteristics of the Different Peoples of the World* (New York and London, 1932).

¹⁷ Berlin, “The Bent Twig”, p. 22.

¹⁸ For example, see Margaret Sleeboom, *Academic Nations in China and Japan: Framed by Concepts of Nature, Culture and the Universal* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004). See also: Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1942); and works of Geoffrey Gorer on national characters, such as: Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character: A Study of the Morals and Behaviour of the English People* (New York: Criterion Books, 1955).

people—was characterized, categorized, and represented in order for the observer to understand foreign cultures, and in many cases, to advise on colonial administration. This has resulted in perceptions of the inferiority of the people being studied, usually in their lack of progress, rationality, religious enlightenment, or even morality.¹⁹

The study of national character has therefore been colored by an almost inevitable sense of superiority and moral righteousness on the part of the researcher, whose objectivity and sympathetic understanding, if more than often present, could not extend beyond the social-political context of his/her study. Such self-righteousness can be detected not only in studies of cultural characteristics of other nations, but also in critical examinations of the researcher's own nation and national culture.

Another important point in understanding the national character discourse is its connection with wartime research. Though not the main concern of this study, it has to be mentioned due to its significance in shaping the meaning of the term “national character”. During the Second World War, both Japanese and German national characters were studied for the purpose of understanding and predicting their wartime behavior.²⁰ During the Cold War, research were conducted to investigate Russian and Soviet characters.²¹ The influence of such studies has expanded beyond the War. For instance, Benedict's anthropological work on Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, has played a crucial role in social discourse on postwar Japan.²² It has not only impacted foreign conceptions of Japanese culture, but also significantly influenced postwar Japanese cultural identity and self-perception.²³

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power”, in Stuart Hall and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity* (Polity Press, 1992), pp. 185-227. See especially the parts about “discourse and power” and “representing the Other”, pp. 203-215.

²⁰ For example, Robert Harry Lowie, *The German People: A Social Portrait to 1914* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945). John F. Embree, *The Japanese Nation: A Social Survey* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1945). Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946).

²¹ Geoffrey Gorer, *The People of Great Russia: A Psychological Study* (London: Cresset Press, 1949). Margaret Mead, *Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority: An Interdisciplinary Approach To Problems Of Soviet Character* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951).

²² Sonya Ryang, “Chrysanthemum's Strange Life: Ruth Benedict in Postwar Japan,” *Asian Anthropology* 1(2002), pp. 87-116: 87.

²³ See John W. Bennett and Nagai Michio, “The Japanese critique of Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,” *American Anthropologist* 55 (1953), pp. 401-411. Pauline Kent, “Japanese Perceptions of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 24.2 (1999), p. 181. Sonya Ryang, “Chrysanthemum's Strange Life”, pp. 87-116.

The Chinese National Character

The origin of Chinese discourse of national character should be traced to Western conceptions of China at least to the publication of *Chinese Characteristics* by Arthur Smith, if not further back. Soon after the book was published, it was translated into Japanese.²⁴ The 1895 Sino-Japanese war further helped to popularize the discussions on cultural and national traits of China, both in Japan and in China itself.

The national character became a subject of intensive cultural studies and wartime research in Japan in the following decades, up to the Second World War.²⁵ The Chinese equivalent of “national character”—the term *guomin xing*—found its way to China through translation of English and Japanese publications, and became an integral part of cultural reform movements since the late Qing period.

In the context of Western and Japanese critiques, the Chinese national character was often related to its inferiority *vis-a-vis* cultural characteristics of other nations, to such an extent that it became the synonym for national defect—the deeply-rooted inferior character of the nation (*minzu liegen xing*). Such a view of the Chinese national character was integrated into the broader discussion over the country’s defeats and backwardness, and together with many other important socio-political and cultural conceptions imported from abroad in similar ways, informed the self-reflective intelligentsia as well as the general public who were driven by a sense of urgency to make sense of the national and international crisis of their time.

To rescue the nation from such a deep crisis, advocates of cultural reforms, despite their divergent political viewpoints, tended to compare the Chinese national character with those of the Western nations, using the latter as a frame of reference. Considering the prominence, if not preeminence, of the quest to change the status quo, it is not

²⁴ Shiba Tamotsu, *Chūgokujin kishitsu* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1896).

²⁵ See, for example, Kuwabara Jitsuzo, “Shinajin’ no bunjaku to hoshu,” in Kyoiku gakujutsu kenkyukai (ed.), *Shina Kenkyu* (Tokyo: Dobunkan, Zasshibu, 1916), pp. 65-93. Hidekata Watanabe, *Shina kokuminseiron* (Tokyo: Osakayagoshoten, 1922). Yasuoka Hideo, *Shosetsu kara mita Shina no minzokusei* (Tokyo: Shuhokaku shuppan, 1926). Sōbē Hara, *Shina shinri no kaibo* (Tokyo: Tokyo Shobo, 1932). Kanzō Uchiyama, *Keru Shina no sugata: uchishan manbun* (Tokyo: Gakugeishoin, 1935). Kotaro Otani, *Gendai Shinajin seishin kozo no kenkyu* (Shanghai: Toa dobun shoin, Shina kenkyubu, 1935). Toranosuke Kato, *Shina no minzokusei* (Tokyo: Kokumin Seishin Bunka Kenkyujo, 1937). Sugiyama Heisuke, *Shina to Shinajin to Nihon* (Tokyo: Kaizosha, 1938). Momoji Yamazaki, *Kore ga Shina da: Shina minzokusei no kagakuteki kaiseki* (Tokyo: Kurita Shoten, 1941). Kōtarō Ōtani, *Shina kokuminsei to keizai seishin* (Tokyo: Ganshodo Shoten, 1943).

surprising that their underlying assumption was one in which the seemingly eternal national character was the ultimate cultural cause of the crisis.

Such perceptions could be found in the critiques of two leading protagonists of the national character reforms, in the 1899-1903 texts of Liang Qichao²⁶ and the many literary critiques of Lu Xun,²⁷ as well as many intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao.²⁸ Of course, this does not suggest that their cultural viewpoints were identical; on the contrary, as we will analyze later, a common call to reform the national character did not in any way homogenize their perceptions and attitudes towards the nation's cultural tradition, or their contending visions for a cultural China, not to mention their divergent political convictions.

At the same time, these critiques of the national character in the late Qing and early Republican periods formed an interesting contrast with scholarly pleas to preserve “the national essence” (*guo cui*)²⁹ or “the national spirit” (*minzu jingshen*)³⁰. Both concepts,

²⁶ For the most recent collection and study of Liang's national character critique, see Liang Qichao 梁启超, *Taiyang de langzhao: Liang Qichao guominxing yanjiu wenxuan* 太阳的朗照：梁启超国民性研究文选 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011).

²⁷ For recent scholarly studies on Lu Xun's national character critique, see works of Wang Hui, Qian Liqun, and Lin Xianzhi. Also see: Zhang Mengyang 张梦阳, *Wuxing yu nuxing: Lu Xun yu zhongguo zhishifenzi de “guominxing”* 悟性与奴性：鲁迅与中国知识分子的“国民性” (Zhenzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1997). Bao Jing 鲍晶 (ed.), *Lu Xun guominxing gaizao taolunji* 鲁迅国民性改造讨论集 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1982). For a recent collection of Lu Xun's critique on national character, see Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Yueliang de Hanguang: Lu Xun guominxing pipan wenxuan* 月亮的寒光：鲁迅国民性批判文选 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011).

²⁸ See, for example, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, “Dongxi minzu genben sixiang zhi chayi” 东西民族根本思想之差异, in Chen Song 陈菘 (ed.), *Wusi qianhou dongxi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenxuan* 五四前后东西文化问题论战文选 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1985), pp. 12-16. Li Dazhao 李大钊, *Yi jing wei benwei de zhongguoren* 以静为本位的中国人, in Lin Yutang etc. 林语堂等 *Xianshuo zhongguoren* 闲说中国人 (Ha'erbing: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 2006), pp. 63-66.

²⁹ For analysis on “national essence”, see Laurence A. Schneider, “National Essence and the New Intelligentsia,” in Charlotte Furth (ed.), *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 57-89. Tze-ki Hon, “National Essence, National Learning, and Culture: Historical Writings in *Guocui xuebao*, *Xueheng*, and *Guoxue jikan*,” *Historiography East and West*, Volume 1, Number 2 (2003), pp. 242-286.

³⁰ For analysis on “national spirit”, see, for example, Axel Schneider, “Between Dao and History: Two Chinese Historians in Search of a Modern Identity for China,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 35, No. 4, Theme Issue 35 (1996): Chinese Historiography in Comparative

similar to the national character (*guomin xing*), were employed to grasp the enduring and distinctive features of a culture.

If the national character is the personified depiction of shared racial-cultural characteristics of a people, the national essence or spirit denotes a cosmological philosophy that manifests itself in the core values of a nation as its historical legacy. While the national character is often associated with backwardness by its critics, the national essence and the national spirit both stress the culture's particularity and continuity without placing it in a negative light.

Another difference between the concept of national character and national essence/national spirit lies in their perceived bearers. The nation and the people in the concept of national character tend to be viewed as "ordinary people", the average Chinese with an abstract personality; but the national essence and the national spirit are usually embodied in the intelligentsia—learned Confucian scholar-officials, though a minority of the population—who are seen as the purveyors and the medium of traditional scholarship. Thus, when proponents of cultural preservation maintain that the national essence or spirit should not be jeopardized by either socio-political changes or foreign intrusion, they are themselves, often as part of the cultural elite, taking the responsibility of a guardian of the national soul—the very last thing to lose before the nation, the culture, and the civilization extinguish.

Turning to the reform era, from the nation-wide debate in the 1980s around *River Elegy* to the 2004 publishing sensation of *Wolf Totem*, critiques of the national character re-surfaced in popular culture.³¹ The former called upon a transformation from Chinese agrarian culture to Western-style modernization—from the yellow earth to the blue ocean; and the latter described the Han Chinese people as a loose herd of sheep in comparison with the Mongolian nomadic people with a semi-religious, enduring wolf spirit.³² In the first decade of the 21st century, a large amount of reprints

Perspective, pp. 54-73. Axel Schneider, "History and Ethics: the choices of post-imperial historiography," unpublished paper for the conference on "The Writing of History in 20th century East Asia: Between Linear Time and the Reproduction of National Consciousness" at Leiden University, 2007.

³¹ Jiang Rong 姜戎, *Lang Tuteng* 狼图腾 (Wuchang, Hubei: Changjiang Arts Publishing House, 2004). For its English translation, see Jiang Rong, translated by Howard Goldblatt, *Wolf Totem* (Penguin, 2008).

³² For texts of *River Elegy*, see Su Xiaokang (ed.), *Cong wusi dao heshang* 从五四到河觞 (Taibei: Fengyun shidai chuban youxian gongsi, 1992). Appendix 2, *He Shang* 河觞.

of works on national character, including the many editions of Arthur Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*, have shown a growing interest in this topic.³³

Aside from the popular culture, continuous scholarly attention has been drawn to the question of national character. Recent studies have brought back the issue of national character reforms.³⁴ Many have dealt with the cultural reforms initiated by Lu Xun and Liang Qichao as unfinished projects with contemporary significance. To many who look for solutions to contemporary social and cultural problems, the question of national character remains a meaningful interpretation of an unsatisfactory reality, and the reforms of the culture and the people are deemed as the ultimate means to better the country.

Yet such a cultural interpretation has also evoked scepticism and criticism especially from post-colonial and post-modernist perspectives, both highlighting the context of imperialism and colonialism in which the concept of national character was produced.

³³ See Sun Longji 孙隆基, *Zhongguo wenhua de shenceng jiegou* 中国文化的深层结构 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004). Bo Yang 柏杨, *Choulou de Zhongguoren* 丑陋的中国人 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008). Lin Yutang, *Xianshuo Zhongguoren*. Kanzō Uchiyama 内山完造, Hidekata Watanabe 渡辺秀方 & Sōbē Hara 原惣兵卫, translated by You Bingqi 尤炳圻, Gao Ming 高明 & Wu Zaoxi 吴藻溪, *Zhongguo ren de lie gen he you gen: Riben ren yan zhong de jin dai Zhongguo* 中国人的劣根和优根: 日本人眼中的近代中国 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 2009).

³⁴ See Zhen Ximiao 郑欣淼, *Wenhua pipan yu guominxing gaizao* 文化批判与国民性改造 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1986). Wen Yuankai 温元凯 & Ni Duan 倪端, *Zhongguo guominxing gaizao* 中国国民性改造 (Hong Kong: Shuguang Tushu, 1988). Ren Jiantao 任剑涛, *Cong zizai dao zizue: Zhongguo guominxing tantao* 从自在到自觉: 中国国民性探讨 (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1992). Yu Zuhua 俞祖华, *Shenchen de minzu fanxing: Zhongguo jindai gaizao guominxing sichao yanjiu* 深沉的民族反省: 中国近代改造国民性思潮研究 (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1996). Yuan Hongliang 袁洪亮, *Ren de xiandaihua: Zhongguo jindai guominxing gaizao sixiang yanjiu* 人的现代化: 中国近代国民性改造思想研究 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005). Jiao Junzhang 教军章, *Zhongguo jindai guominxing wenti yanjiu de lilun shiyu jiqi jiazhi* 中国近代国民性问题研究的理论视阈及其价值 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009). Lin Xianzhi 林贤治, *Zhishang de shenyin* 纸上的声音 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2010). Zhou Jianchao 周建超, *Jindai Zhongguo "ren de xiandaihua sixiang" yanjiu* 近代中国“人的现代化思想”研究 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2010). Mo Luo 摩罗, *Zhongguo de tengtong—guominxing pipan yu wenhua zhengzhixue kunjing* 中国的疼痛——国民性批判与文化政治学困境 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2011). Mo Luo 摩罗 and Yang Fan 杨帆 (eds.), *Renxing de fusu: "guominxing" pipan de qiyuan yu fansi* 人性的复苏: “国民性批判”的起源与反思 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2011).

Critical studies of the national character discourse, while acknowledging the benign intentions of the cultural modernizers, have nonetheless questioned the theoretical ground and empirical validity of national character reforms.

1.3. Nationalism and Cultural Identity

The study of self-perception is essentially a study of the awareness of one's own social, political and cultural identity. In the case of this research, the examination of intellectual self-perceptions of "their" own nation means to probe into their understanding and imagination of a national identity, however broadly or narrowly defined. This, then, naturally leads to the equally complex and contested question of nationalism.

Fully aware of the intimate relations between these two concepts and the subject of this study, I will explore the theoretical implications of both to the study of perceptions, and in the meanwhile bring them into the focus of the realms of culture and cultural exchange that are most relevant to this research. In other words, this research highlights the intellectual and cultural aspects and leaves other related aspects of nationalism and national identity to be explored elsewhere, while bearing in mind the many inter-connected dimensions of the question of national identity—political, ethnic, religious—and the many approaches to unravel the question of nationalism, such as the state, the civic, the popular, and so on.

Nationalism: Perception and its Cultural Foundation

In his *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines nation as an imagined political community, with finite boundaries and sovereign within the territorial stretch.

³⁵ He regards nationalism and nation-ness as a particular kind of cultural artefacts which command profound emotional legitimacy and arouse deep attachment.

The consciousness of nation and nationalism, in Anderson's conception, has been historically formed out of, and against, preceding cultural systems—religious communities and dynastic realms. When certainties of such cultural systems were lost, the search began for new ways to apprehend the world and to link time, space, and

³⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London [etc.]: Verso, 2006).

power meaningfully together. With the development and spread of print-capitalism, nationalism as a newly emerged consciousness has become the most universally legitimate value in political life.³⁶ It has become a widely accepted notion that, in the modern nation-state system, nationalism is a fundamental parameter for identity. The state represents all citizens in its territory, regardless of ethnicity, race, gender or religion. To legitimize its political power, the state heavily relies on nationalism as the predominant ideology and the source of sovereignty.

Yet Anderson's conception of nation and nationalism has been subject to criticism in many ways. Prasenjit Duara, for one, has questioned the way Anderson described the formation of nationalism. He believes that such concepts as nation, nation-state, and national identity did not, at one point of time in history, evolve as self-same consciousness subjects against other entities like empires. In addition, he argues that the line drawn between one nation, nationalism, national identity and the other is subject to negotiation and manipulation from both within and outside.³⁷

As Duara rightly points out, the “territorial model of civic nationalism” was never fully adequate for the nation-state. Its boundaries have been constantly tested in many multi-ethnic states and states with large overseas populations, especially when it comes to spiritual and transcendent matters.³⁸ With the “territorial mode of civic nationalism” being challenged, nationalism as political ideology in the age of globalization becomes a double-edged sword for the modern state. Thus, the authenticity and distinctiveness of the nation is increasingly stressed by claiming a common national history with enduring continuity embodied in cultural traditions.³⁹ It seems that the ideology of nationalism has turned into “cultural-ethnic models”.

The importance of cultural and ethnic elements in nationalism has been further stressed by scholars like Anthony Smith. In Smith's definition, nationalism is “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential

³⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 3, 7, 12, 36.

³⁷ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 3-16. Prasenjit Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation,” *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 30 (1993), pp. 1-26.

³⁸ Prasenjit Duara, “Nationalism and transnationalism in the globalisation of China,” *China Report* 39: 1 (2003), pp. 1-19: 10.

³⁹ Duara, “Nationalism and transnationalism”, p. 14.

‘nation’.”⁴⁰ If the term “nation” is to describe a historical type of human community, characterized by a cultural and/or political identity, and “imagined, willed, and felt” by its members,⁴¹ nationalism, then, as an ideological movement, draws heavily from the nation’s cultural tradition as sacred resource for a collective identity.

In this light, Smith contends that the pervasive power of ethno-cultural elements in nationalism has been understated due to the theoretical limits of an “arbitrary and unnecessarily restrictive” modernist perspective,⁴² a perspective from which Anderson and alike view both nationalisms and nations as recent productions of modernization and modernity, however they are defined.

Smith’s argument echoes with Duara’s observation that the civic-territorial model is heavily constrained by the historical phenomenon of Western European nationalism as well as the theoretical framework that is drawn of such phenomenon. It is to suggest that, just because nationalisms as understood in the Western European context happen to be of a civic-territorial model, it does not mean that ethno-cultural nationalisms elsewhere should be seen as exceptions or abnormalities. This then goes on to suggest that, in the social and symbolic processes of national emergence and persistence, cultural resources, by maintaining a sense of national identity, have become regarded as sacred foundations of the nation.

Nationalism as an Emotionally Charged Ideology

According to Smith, the cultural-ethnic aspects of nationalism, not very obviously present in the paradigm of modernism, are much more visible if a perennial or primordial perspective is introduced in the study of nationalism. Yet it has to be pointed out that Anderson’s assumption does not deny the elements of cultural and ethnic ties within a nation or nationalism. For instance, he acknowledges that these elements carry a natural, deep, horizontal comradeship with fellow-members, which assumes historical destinies manifested in attachment to kinship, home, mother-language, and inspires “self-sacrificing love”.⁴³ Of course, primordial ties such as kinship and territory are helpful in understanding why nations and cultures have later

⁴⁰ Anthony Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Malden, MA [etc.]: Blackwell, 2008), p. 15.

⁴¹ Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, p. 23.

⁴² Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, pp. 15 & 18.

⁴³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 141 & 143.

developed into such pervasive identities that they sometimes evoke unconditional passion and commitment.

The intensity of the emotional dynamics that nationalism often envokes, such as the entanglement of pride and loathing being discussed here, is better explained with the sociological concept of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is based on a fundamental differentiation between ethnic in-group (we-group) and out-group (others-group). It defines in-group relations as comradeship and peace; and the relations with the out-group as of a hostile and war-like nature. Accompanying the different views of the in-group and the out-group relations are different sentiments: attachment, loyalty, and pride towards the in-group; and hatred, contempt, distrust, and fear towards out-groups.⁴⁴

An ethnocentric attitude or outlook tends to apply values derived from one's own cultural background to other cultural contexts—one's own standards of values are perceived as universal and intrinsically true. Therefore, the in-group is perceived as strong, virtuous, superior, claiming attachment, loyalty or even sacrifice; in contrast, out-groups are perceived as weak, immoral, inferior, inducing hatred, contempt, or fear.

⁴⁵ In the social sciences, nationalism is often categorized as an advanced form of ethnocentrism, with loyalty to “a politically distinct entity” or “state leadership”, as well as “a formalised ideology”.⁴⁶ From this perspective, nationalism is placed in a wide spectrum between patriotism and xenophobia, between love and devotion to the nation at one end, and unreasonable dislike of outsiders and contempt for their ways of life at the other end.⁴⁷

Having said that, just as the notion of ethnocentrism has been associated with negative connotations, emotional attachment to the nation and nationalism are quite often viewed in a less favorable light than what is seen as rational, civic nationalism. From the perspective of modernism, the dichotomy of Western and non-Western nationalisms tends to suggest a rationalist, enlightened, liberal modern nationalism in

⁴⁴ Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes and Group Behaviour* (New York [etc.]: Wiley, 1972), pp. 1-9.

⁴⁵ See William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of the Sociological Importance of Usages, Manners, Customs, Mores and Morals* (Boston [etc.]: Ginn and Company, 1906).

⁴⁶ Vernon Reynolds, Vincent Falger and Ian Vine (ed.), *The Socio-biology of Ethnocentrism: Evolutionary Dimensions of Xenophobia, Discrimination, Racism and Nationalism* (London [etc.]: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 8-9.

⁴⁷ H. D. Forbes, *Nationalism, Ethnocentrism and Personality: Social Science and Critical Theory* (Chicago [etc.]: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 63.

contrast to their non-Western counterparts that are often organic, shrill, authoritarian and mystical. Ironically, this modernist perspective has, as Smith puts it, its own “inherent ethnocentrism”⁴⁸. Using the yardstick of a liberal, civic conception of nation, loyalty to the ethnic national in-group is more often described as “narrow” and “aggressive”.⁴⁹ Studies of the psychology of nationalism have depicted the typical personality of a nationalist in the light of social discrimination, and argued that such a personality tends to be irrational, aggressive, weak, anti-democratic, often subject to ethnic prejudice.⁵⁰

From another perspective, within the context of colonial history, nationalism is viewed as a world-wide phenomenon brought about by anti-colonial movements. It reflects a natural tendency to resist undesired foreign rule, a claim of sovereignty and independence, and, to use Berlin’s description, the “straightening of bent backs” of the oppressed. This metaphor is very useful in explaining Chinese nationalism as a highly emotionally charged ideology. The intensified emotions have been the characteristic feature of Chinese nationalism, and not exclusively of the radical nationalists. For example, cultural nationalism has been associated with Chinese conservatism. Benjamin Schwartz wrote of a sense of profound pride and frustration—often not inherited in conservatism in general—as a dominant element in modern Chinese conservatism.⁵¹

The nationalistic sentiments demonstrated in Chinese revolutions since the late Qing did not fade away, even after sovereignty and national independence were no longer an issue at hand. In fact, Western imperialist expansion and national humiliation in modern history have remained the recurring themes in collective memories.⁵² The wounded pride, as a legacy of the anti-imperialist, nationalistic movements a century ago, repeatedly manifests itself in both official and popular rhetoric, both in everyday

⁴⁸ Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Forbes, *Nationalism, Ethnocentrism and Personality*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ See Theodor Adorno [et al.], *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).

⁵¹ Benjamin Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism in General and China in Particular,” in Charlotte Furth (ed.), *The Limits of Change*, pp. 3-21: 16.

⁵² See, for example, Paul A. Cohen, “Remembering and Forgetting: National Humiliation in Twentieth-Century China,” *Twentieth-Century China*, Vol.27, No.2 (2002), pp. 1-39.

William Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives* 29 (2004), pp. 199-218. Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (California: The University of California Press, 2004). Callahan, *China: the Pessimist Nation*.

life and in intellectual discourse.

It has to be said that the purpose of exploring the emotional dimension of nationalism is not to justify the intensified passion, nor to denounce it, but to recognize its impact on the emergence and persistence of nationalism, and in doing so, to better understand its implications to Chinese self-perceptions and the search for a cultural identity.

Cultural Identity: the Universal Search for Particularity

There should be no question that the concepts of nation, nationalism, and national identity are not stable entities; that they are fluid concepts to be understood in the relationships between the Self and the Other. Yet, acknowledging the flexible boundaries of nation and national identity does not mean that the line drawn between the Self and the Other is no longer prominent. On the contrary, nationalism remains the most important regulator of international relations, which is supported by both political institutional structures and cultural forces. In fact, it remains prominent in almost every sphere of global life. For example, national and regional approaches to historical writing continue to be meaningful in many ways, despite the epistemological critique of history from schools of thought such as postmodernism. Furthermore, postmodernism itself, as a global school of thought, is used in various parts of the world as “a tool to fortify boundaries, rather than to tear them down”⁵³.

Globalization might have blurred many boundaries across national borders, yet it has also brought nations into a global competition for distinctiveness and uniqueness—a universal search for particularity. It is almost as if a certain fixed cultural identity can be constructed, and has to be constructed. The nation and the individual are both confronted with the idea that a sense of belonging can only be found by stressing the common historical and cultural experiences among the we-group—the Self, while at the same time differentiating it with many others-groups—the Other—in one’s claim of a particular history and a distinctive culture with unique characteristics.

While international communications brought together a global community at an unprecedented speed and scale; the urge to define the Self in relation to the Others has become even stronger. In the face of cultural globalization, there are urgent needs felt

⁵³ Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (vol. eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, Volume 5, *Historical Writing Since 1945* (Oxford [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.

to guard local cultures from the invasion of global consumption culture. All these perceptions of lines drawn between the Self and the Other, either as Anderson's "imagined communities", or Smith's "felt history", are themselves constructions based on factual cultural or historical communities, yet they have become autonomous notions that are powerful enough to shape, and even to challenge, existing communities.

The search for a particular cultural and historical identity is especially problematic and urgent in post-colonial societies. As newly born nations, their encounters with the modern West have put them in situations with two seemingly irreconcilable Others—the past and the West—both very much present.⁵⁴ Therefore, the search for national particularity that transcends both Others becomes the only imaginable answer to the question of cultural identity.

The PRC period under Mao saw very limited cultural contacts with Europe and America. The nation's distinctiveness was identified through perceived images of a contrasting non-Chinese Other. The construction of such images was carefully crafted, and determined by what was believed to be the proper place for the young nation in the world and its relations with friends and foes in the international community.⁵⁵ In the Cultural Revolution, a myth was created that China occupied the center place of world revolution as "the leader of all victimized peoples in their historical struggle against white capitalism"⁵⁶.

Yet this myth was soon broken by the reforms and opening-up at the end of the 1970s. The influx of foreign philosophy and literature swayed the cultural realm of the 1980s. Meanwhile, increasing interaction with the outside world brought constant adjustment of self-perception. The consequent forces of globalization are two-fold: increasing contacts with the outside world request the nation to be global—to accept certain rules and values in the existing international system, and at the same time to be authentically Chinese—to claim and interpret its particularity as well as its standpoint towards the rest of the world.

⁵⁴ Arif Dirlik, "Culture Against History? The Politics of East Asian Identity," *Development and Society*, volume 28, number 2 (1999), pp. 167-90: 167.

⁵⁵ See Stefan Landsberger, "Encountering the European and Western Other in Chinese Propaganda Posters," in Wintle, M. (ed.), *Imagining Europe - Europe and European Civilisation as Seen from its Margins and by the Rest of the World, in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., 2008), pp. 147-175: 148.

⁵⁶ Landsberger, "Encountering the European and Western Other", p. 151.

Hence, the reform era has seen a rising economic and political power that is compelled to look for a compatible cultural presence in its “linking up with the international community”.⁵⁷ Official ideology promotes the country’s “peaceful development” as a response to speculations of a “China threat” or “China collapse”. The hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the Expo 2010 in Shanghai are but two examples of large-scale public relations events. In the meantime, various communication channels have been established under the supervision of the State Council Information Office. As a part of the pro-active strategy to become “a strong cultural power”, efforts are made to build a favorable national image abroad and to strengthen the nation’s soft power through cultural exchange projects such as the Confucius Institutes. Under the umbrella of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”, the particular Chinese characteristics are being explored not only in economic and political senses, but also in the cultural realm.

Continuous efforts of the state and the official rhetoric accompanying them are often merged with popular discourse. Since the 1990s, there has been increasing interest in traditional culture from different social and cultural groups. Most notably, a resurgence of traditional scholarship as National Learning (*guo xue*) has not only promoted the study of Confucian classics, but also the values embodied in the scholarly tradition.⁵⁸ As Dirlit phrased it, “traditions once condemned to the past have made a comeback with a vengeance”.⁵⁹

Before we look further into the search for a cultural identity, we first have to examine it in the light of the interaction between Chinese and Western perceptions, for cultural identities are formed and developed through the encounters of different worldviews from within and without. In the present research, the discourse of national character is examined as a recurring theme in the Chinese cultural debate and Chinese-Western communications, notably during the two periods when such interactions of perceptions are most dynamic—firstly in the late Qing and early Republican periods, and secondly in the reform era.

⁵⁷ See Wang Hongying, “Linking Up with the International Track: What’s in a Slogan?” *The China Quarterly*, 189 (March 2007), pp. 1-23.

⁵⁸ See Axel Schneider, “Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a ‘New’ Historical-Cultural Identity in the PRC”, *East Asia History* 22 (December 2001), pp. 129-144. Arif Dirlit, “Guoxue/National Learning in the Age of Global Modernity,” *China Perspectives*, No. 2011/1, pp. 4-13.

⁵⁹ Dirlit, “Culture Against History?”, p. 171.

1.4. Self in the Other: the International Dimension

The notion of national and cultural identity as fluid concepts denoting the relationship between the Self and the Other informs us that, empirically, the collective self-awareness of a nation, though based on common historical and cultural experiences shared by its people, is developed through its interactions with the outside world. The study of the intellectual perceptions of the nation is obviously an examination of the intellectual imagination of the nation's relations with others, and its relative place in comparison with them.

In this light, since the late Qing period, intellectual and cultural exchanges with the West have greatly shaped, if not directly induced, the process of Chinese identity formation. Various forms of encounters with the modern West have raised the awareness of self-reflective Chinese intellectuals that a weak national Self is facing a strong and inevitable Other. Such encounters and such awareness directed different Chinese schools of thoughts towards rather divergent perceptions of the nation's past, present and future, leading to cultural proposals ranging from wholesale Westernization to selective adoption of Western knowledge.

At the same time, the movement to learn from the West, largely prompted by an urge to improve the national Self and to escape the fate of falling into disgrace, has also invoked as its counter-current a fear of cultural metamorphosis, for it is perceived by many as a fatal process with the risk of losing the cultural essence and eventually the national Self.

As such, the Other is simultaneously a subject of learning and a hegemony to be overcome in order for the Self to survive. It is precisely the negotiation between these two paradoxical aspects of the Other that has divided Chinese intellectuals into different schools covering a wide spectrum, some labelled as cultural radicals, others cultural conservatives. And in the same vein, the national Self is perceived in contradictory lights: while some criticize the weak national character, others strive to safeguard the national essence and national spirit.

This is a dilemma not particular to China, but common to post-colonial societies whose encounters with the modern West placed them in between the opposition of the past and the West, as I noted earlier. Despite numerous efforts to overcome these two

oppositions, and many cultural creations to appropriate the presence of both the past and the West, the negotiation of their relationship has never been fully satisfactory.

This has to do with the fact that, to various degrees, the importation of Western knowledge has brought along with it a process of internalization and naturalization of Western perceptions. In the case of China, it suggests the internalization of Western perceptions of the world as well as of China's place within such a world order. Placed in the context of global colonial history, such internalized perceptions are better understood by employing the concept of Orientalism.⁶⁰

Western Worldviews and Orientalism

Western perceptions of China, or of any other non-Western nation, are constituents of Western views of the world order in general and the place of “the West” within that order in particular. They are essentially reflections of a self-image affiliated with the concept of “the West”. The geo-political term of “the West”, with its origin in Western Europe, now includes developed and industrialized countries in Europe, America, and even in the Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, the cultural notion of “the West” was initially formed around a European continental awareness.

Though the European cultural landscape has always been as diverse as it can be, collective cultural awareness nevertheless emerged, centering on a shared Christendom and what is called “rational restlessness”—as some argue, the psychological make-up of Europe.⁶¹ It stood in sharp contrast with perceptions of many other cultures and societies that are non-Christian, non-rational, and non-European. Western worldviews, having evolved in a Eurocentric fashion, confirmed the uniqueness of the European identity in the process of imperialist expansions.

Following European dominance, the United States in the 20th century have played a critical role in the development of Western worldviews. The two World Wars witnessed stronger American military, religious, financial, political, and cultural presence around the globe, which eventually led to its superpower status at the end of the Cold War. Increasing global influence of the U.S. has helped to promote a belief that it is the Manifest Destiny of America to spread not only Christian ideas, but also its liberal

⁶⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 9th edition, 2003).

⁶¹ Hall, “The West and the Rest”, pp. 197-201.

economic system and political democracy to the rest of the world. This optimism in Western values and their universality is clearly demonstrated in the “end of History” thesis.⁶²

A growing affirmation of alternative worldviews in East Asia and the Middle East in the last decades has raised Western concerns over the growing impact of other cultures. Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis argues that culture and religion have replaced political ideas as the major forces to divide the West and the rest of the world.⁶³ The Western civilization and its modern form of Western modernization, as Huntington maintained, are challenged by several other distinctive civilizations including the Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Latin American, and “possibly African” cultures.⁶⁴ This “clash” discourse emphasizes the threat of Islamic and East Asian cultures to Western civilization, and warns against the rise of anti-Western nationalisms.

Huntington’s thesis has been widely criticized for having failed to escape the antagonistic logic of “us” versus “them”.⁶⁵ Such a framework places opposite of “the West” any other cultures that represent values different from prevailing Western values. Following this logic, the rest of the world, especially “the Orient”, is perceived with confined understanding and reduced to a simplistic image, either favorably as a fantasized Eastern wonderland, or a demonized region of terrorism, or anything in between that is nevertheless subject to Western influence.

Undoubtedly, there have been scholarly attempts from within the West to view East Asian and Chinese history from alternative perspectives,⁶⁶ but antagonistic perceptions of other cultures remain an important, if not dominant, part of the Western worldview. Its critiques, such as the widely influential theory of Orientalism, demonstrate its very presence and prevalence up to the present.

⁶² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006 reprint).

⁶³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁶⁴ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, pp. 45-46.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism* (London: Hurst, 2011).

⁶⁶ For example, see: Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center: Four Thousand Years of Engagement with the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

Orientalism, in Edward Said's view, points to a way of thinking imbedded in the European and American cultural traditions, which holds simplistic and reductive views of Islam and the Arabs as the Others—essentially “not like us” and “not appreciating our values”.⁶⁷ It describes a tendency to forge a collective Western identity through self-affirmation, while at the same time understanding the rest of the world in a highly polemical and antagonistic fashion.

The theory of Orientalism criticizes reductionist perceptions of the invented Other, as well as the lack of intention to understand the visions of “Oriental” people as to what they are and what they want to be. Said identified two layers of Orientalism in Western understanding: the almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity as “latent Orientalism”; and the various stated views about Oriental societies, languages, literatures, history, sociology, etc., as “manifest Orientalism”.⁶⁸

In the colonial context, the Orientalist worldview has come into being as an imperialist tradition, an accomplice to empire, with the intention to civilize, to enlighten, and to bring order. It is a discourse produced in an uneven exchange of political, intellectual, cultural, and moral power. As a result, Orientalism is fundamentally “a political doctrine willed over the Orient”.⁶⁹

Moreover, the will to understand, to control, and even to manipulate, has manifested itself in distorted knowledge of the Orient. Consequently, Orientalism, being an influential academic tradition, has not only affected Western production of knowledge, as its critics argue, but also, being a cultural hegemony, greatly influenced the knowledge production in the Orient, about the Orient itself.⁷⁰

Orientalism and Internalized Orientalism in the Chinese Context

Although Said's Orientalism mainly deals with Western perceptions of Islamic and Arabic cultures, the concept has also been widely employed in the studies of Asia and East Asia, including China. Western knowledge of the country and its people has accumulated over centuries, dating back to the stories of Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci, which were later enriched by many other missionaries, intellectuals, diplomats,

⁶⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, p. xx.

⁶⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 206.

⁶⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 12 & 204.

⁷⁰ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

merchants, and travellers who followed in their footsteps.

These interesting encounters, as seen from Western perspective, have been the topic of diligent research due to their historical and cultural significance.⁷¹ Because the country has long been a subject of Western study and exploration, most research has treated their encounters as a crucial factor in the history of Western dealings with China, as well as an important part of Western views of itself and the world.

However, the other side of the story—Chinese responses towards Western perceptions—has to a large extent remained an uncharted territory. Surely, as a mirror concept of Orientalism, studies of occidentalism have subsequently drawn attention to the increasing awareness of Western dominance and the consequent responses from the rest of the world, especially “the East”.⁷² However, occidentalism in most cases refers simply to a sort of counterpart of Orientalism, or reversed Orientalism; few have explored the complexity, not to mention the far-reaching socio-cultural implications, of Chinese reactions towards the Orientalist discourse.

Both Orientalism and occidentalism have been developed into highly contested

⁷¹ See Mary Gertrude Mason, *Western Concepts of China and the Chinese, 1840-1876* (New York: Seeman Printery, 1939). Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967). Harold R. Isaacs, *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India* (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1972). John K. Fairbank, *China Perceived: Images and Policies in Chinese-American Relations* (New York: Knopf, 1974). Zhang Longxi, “The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West,” *Critical Inquiry*, 15:1 (1988), pp. 108-131. Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong [etc.]: Oxford University Press, 1989). Jonathan Goldstein, Jerry Israel, and Hilary Conroy (eds.), *America Views China: American Images of China Then and Now* (Lehigh University Press, 1991). Steven W. Mosher, *China Misperceived: American Illusions and Chinese Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China 1931-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York [etc.]: Norton, 1998). Zhijian Tao, *Drawing the Dragon: Western European Reinvention of China* (Bern, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁷² See, for example, James G. Carrier (ed.), *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Couze Venn, *Occidentalism: Modernity and Subjectivity* (London [etc.]: Sage, 2000). Michael Hill, “Asian Values” as Reverse Orientalism: the Case of Singapore (Singapore: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 2000). Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York [etc.]: The Penguin Press, 2004). Azizan Baharuddin and Faridah Noor Mohd Noor (eds.), *Occidentalism and Orientalism: Reflections of the East and the Perceptions of the West* (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, 2008).

notions, and have raised more questions than they have answered. Said's conception of Orientalism has received critiques and responses from different perspectives, which has linked the study of Orientalism to the concept of, for example, post-colonialism.⁷³ But what concerns this research most is how Chinese intellectuals incorporated Orientalist discourses, in one way or another, into their own perceptions and imaginations of Chinese culture. In this respect, it is especially noteworthy to look into Arif Dirlik's characterization of "self-orientalization"⁷⁴ and Daniel Vukovich's description of "internalized Orientalism".⁷⁵

Whereas Said points out that Orientalism represents a reductionist cultural construction that ignores local differences and suppresses local autonomy, Dirlik goes further to say that it has become more than just an intellectual instrument of imperialism, rather a way of re-ordering the world and a form of "intellectual imperialism" by itself.⁷⁶ The pervasiveness of Orientalism, in his opinion, owes partly to the active participation of "the Orientals" and, to be more specific, to their tendencies of self-orientalization. Dirlik uses the concept of "contact zone" to describe the colonial encounters where unequal exchanges were made and "the Orientals" actively absorbed, selected, invented, and used Western knowledge.⁷⁷ He argues that, despite their intention to overcome the oppositions of the past and the West and to create a new culture, their efforts could hardly escape the Orientalist perceptions being internalized.

According to such an interpretation, self-orientalization has become an integral part of the history of Orientalism. The West has been internalized in Asian consciousness; and Orientalist readings of Asia and East Asia have been reproduced by "the Orientals" themselves. Thus, Euro-American images of Asia may have been incorporated into the self-images of Asians, to such an extent that they bring the Asian "traditions" into question whether they were "invented" under the influence of Orientalist perceptions

⁷³ See, for example, Sucheta Mazumdar, Kaiwar Vasant and Thierry Labica (eds.), *From Orientalism to Postcolonialism: Asia, Europe and the Lineages of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁷⁴ Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism", *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 35: Chinese Historiography in Comparative Perspective, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1996), pp. 96-118: 104.

⁷⁵ Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C* (London [etc.]: Routledge, 2011), p. 17.

⁷⁶ Dirlik, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 98.

⁷⁷ Dirlik, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 112.

of Asia.⁷⁸ To this end, Orientalist conceptions as a hegemonic power had no distinct geographical origin, not particularly or easily identifiable as Western, or Eastern.⁷⁹

Similarly, Vukovich brings to light the internalization of Orientalist knowledge and perceptions by some Chinese people, in particular the “ethnically Chinese or main-land born Chinese” in the field of Sinology or China Studies who act as “the purveyors of Sinological Orientalism”⁸⁰. He argues that the presumption of a Chinese cultural backwardness, the discourse of lack, and the perception of modern Chinese history as a tortuous path to normalcy, have all been produced not only by Orientalists, but also by Chinese themselves in an Orientalist fashion. This, he argues, is essentially the result of the global uneven production of knowledge.⁸¹

Vukovich also observes that this internalized Orientalism has a distinctive anti-official feature. To be more specific, many in China have incorporated Western criticism, or sometimes even Orientalist argumentation, into their own criticism of various sorts against the party-state. But on the other hand, what Vukovich did not point out is that Orientalist knowledge, images, and perceptions that cast an enchanting light on China have also been incorporated in Chinese self-perceptions, which are often in line with the official rhetoric. Therefore, internalized Orientalism as part of the profound influence of Western knowledge and conceptions does not necessarily lead to one specific school of thought or another: it is a phenomenon that can be observed in many different even contending visions of the country.

Knowledge and Perceptions: the Dilemma of Learning from the West

If we speak of an internalized Orientalism or a tendency of self-orientalization, how, and how much, has it influenced Chinese self-perceptions? Undoubtedly, since China encountered the modern West, almost all Western social and political theories, among others Social-Darwinism, nationalism, liberalism, and Marxism, have found reception in respective schools of thought in China. Chinese intellectuals, by using the lens of the Westerners, began to examine the relationship between the past and the present from a perspective that was radically different from the imperial outlook.

⁷⁸ Dirlit, “Chinese History and Orientalism”, p. 104.

⁷⁹ Dirlit, “Chinese History and Orientalism”, p. 108.

⁸⁰ Vukovich, *China and Orientalism*, p. 18.

⁸¹ Vukovich, *China and Orientalism*, pp. 17-21.

In terms of the relationship between Chinese and Western cultures, the late Qing and early Republican periods witnessed the rise and fall of a wide variety of schools of thought. From Zhang Zhidong's thesis of "Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as function", to Hu Shi's call for a "wholesale Westernization", intellectuals actively selected and absorbed from a pool of different Western theories and thought to adjust their image of the national Self—the nation's own past and tradition—and to promote their version of the future for Chinese culture.

Compared to a progressive and strong West, China was oftentimes placed at a relatively inferior position in the world of nations by advocates of Westernization. To them, the country's salvation lay in modernization, and Western knowledge was the only road to modernizing China into a strong nation. Social-Darwinism provided a ready tool to interpret the country's past critically, even to the extent to negate it. In the country's deep political and socio-cultural crisis, such a modernist framework, with its Orientalist epistemology and its implication of Western universalism, formed a discourse that few Chinese intellectuals could resist.

Thus, the movement of learning from the West has never been able to escape the intellectual and cultural dilemma of a late-comer to modernity. As previously noted, the outlook of ethnocentrism and nationalism usually perceives the in-group as superior, moral and strong; whereas in the case of Chinese encounters with the modern West, cultural reformers, however unwillingly, were forced to perceive the out-groups as superior and strong, with true and universal values, and at the same time viewing their own culture as inferior.

One way of making sense of this dilemma is Joseph Levenson's thesis of "history" and "value". According to Levenson, Chinese imperial worldviews maintained a harmony between history and value—the loyalty and emotional attachment to tradition on the one hand, and intellectual commitment to cultural tradition on the other. Yet Western intrusion created tension between these two, for the attachment to one's tradition, i.e. history, was confronted by intellectual alienation from it, as one began to see value elsewhere.⁸² Therefore, to emotionally justify the departure from tradition, the nationalist replaced "culture" with "nation" as the proper unit of comparison, still with the hope to establish the cultural equivalence of China with the West.

⁸² Joseph Levenson, "'History' and 'Value': The Tensions of Intellectual Choice in Modern China," in Arthur Wright (ed.), *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 150.

An extreme form of alienation from one's own culture is cultural iconoclasm, which in this case was directed towards Confucian cultural tradition. In the eyes of many May Fourth "Westernized" intellectuals, Confucianism had nurtured a national character "detrimental to modernization".⁸³ In the same vein, "the second enlightenment" of the 1980s saw tendencies of Orientalist epistemology in *River Elegy*, which renders backward not just a reified native tradition, but its carriers—the people⁸⁴. The metonymic reductionism in Orientalist perceptions has been apparent in the identification of China with Confucianism, despotism, bureaucratism, familism, or even with particular racial characteristics, all of them traceable to Orientalist representations.⁸⁵

Needless to say, perceptions of an inferior and backward national Self were formed in specific social settings, and ironically, often out of nationalistic urges to change the status-quo. Moreover, the authenticity of such self-perceptions should be called into question if one takes into account the cultural reformer's political ambition and subsequent strategy of social mobilization. However, it does not mean that their cultural and intellectual implications can be invalidated. As this research observes, Euro-American Orientalist perceptions and analytical frameworks remain a visible component in the formulation of the Chinese self-image and Chinese perceptions of the past.⁸⁶

Yet again, however influential the tendency of self-orientalization might have been, it has to be pointed out that it is only one of the many parameters of the formation of self-perceptions. Aspiration for progress has given cultural modernization a high profile, with references to the West, and has for a long time rendered other cultural convictions into a more or less negative "conservatism"—a refusal towards changes. In this research, these cultural convictions will be discussed in more detail not only as different approaches to Western knowledge and perceptions, but also as different understandings of the meaning of the past.

⁸³ Tu Wei-ming, "Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center," in idem. (ed.), *The Living Tree: the Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 1-34: 27.

⁸⁴ Dirlit, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 115.

⁸⁵ Dirlit, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 107.

⁸⁶ Dirlit, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 106.

1.5. The Presence of the Past: the Historical Dimension

The process of placing the Self in relation to the Other, is at the same time an appropriation of the nation's place in history, in its relations with the past. To put it in another way, the past can be seen as a second reference to compare the national Self with. In this process, the significance of the past is two-fold. Firstly, the past persists in the present as historical legacy in various forms, among which cultural tradition is undoubtedly one variety. It is the point of departure, if one believes in any form of historical continuity, from which the present sets its course, and upon which a sense of identity is based. Therefore, one can never speak of the understanding of the present without having a frame of reference set to the past.

Secondly, contemporary perceptions of the Self, if not an extension or revision of precedent identities, are at least heavily influenced by the undercurrent that has shaped them. In the case of Chinese perceptions, the ongoing debate around cultural identity not only constantly refers to historical events as having defined Chinese culture, but also makes use of history as a source of legitimacy.

Therefore, the significance of the past directs the study of self-perceptions and cultural identity back to the Qing Empire's early encounters with the modern West, when reflections on the imperial past began. This study argues that, since then, the past has been constantly revised and appropriated into perceptions of the present and imaginations for the future, notably with the West being incorporated into such self-perceptions; and previous revisions and appropriations of the past have also been continuously adjusted or even overthrown, which eventually leads to a diversified landscape of contemporary Chinese self-perceptions.

Culturalism to Nationalism: A Cultural Metamorphosis?

Imperial Chinese worldviews were characterized by the notion of *Tianxia* (all under Heaven) as the world, with the Chinese civilization at the center. The Middle Kingdom, perceived as the universal empire, was surrounded by barbaric regions; the emperor was the embodiment of universal moral power claimed from Heaven. The empire was connected to other parts of the world through the tribute system, which suggested a formal, hierarchical inequality between the civilized and the barbaric.

Such a worldview, either called “synarchy under the treaties”,⁸⁷ or a universal “culturalism”,⁸⁸ or “hierarchical universality”,⁸⁹ suggested a moral universalism of Chinese origin. The ideal Confucian world order was a manifestation of cosmological harmony; *Tianxia* was the regime of traditional culture, morality, and universal values.⁹⁰ In short, Chinese culturalism defined itself as the alternative to foreign barbarism.⁹¹

The historical consciousness of China as a member of the family of nations was brought about by military and cultural challenges in the late Qing dynasty. Perceptions of China from within—one with China as the center of civilization—encountered Western perceptions of China as a stagnant Eastern empire in comparison with the modern West; and this encounter resulted in an unprecedented challenge towards the *Tianxia* worldview and the centrality of Confucianism as the universal moral value.

The adjustment of self-perceptions came hand in hand with an increasing awareness of the power and righteousness of other civilizations. The making of the nation was closely linked to the understanding of its place in relation with other powers, in the meantime informed by how it was perceived by other nations. With the imperial worldview severely challenged, as Levenson put it, “nationalism invades the Chinese scene as culturalism hopelessly gives way”.⁹² The “culturalism to nationalism” thesis described the traumatic transition from an imperial worldview to a modern nation-state identity. Social-Darwinist theory proclaimed the nation as the highest unit in the struggle for existence, and the loss of faith in the cultural tradition should not be lamented. Therefore, nationalism evolved as the competitor of culturalism, and eventually leading to the denial of culturalism.⁹³

It is against such a background that Arthur Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics* and the

⁸⁷ John Fairbank, “Synarchy Under the Treaties,” in idem. (ed.) *Chinese Thoughts and Institutions* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 204-231.

⁸⁸ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, Vol. 1: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).

⁸⁹ Duara, “Nationalism and transnationalism”, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Levenson, *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*, pp. 98-104. John Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). C.P. Fitzgerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

⁹¹ Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, Vol. 2: The Problem of Monarchical Decay* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 170.

⁹² Levenson, *The Problem of Intellectual Continuity*, p. 104.

⁹³ Levenson, “History and Value”, pp. 150-152 & 170-173.

question of national character caught the attention of Chinese cultural reformers. The defeat in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War led to a negative interpretation of the nation's past, causing rather painful self-reflections. Nationalistic aspirations propelled intellectuals to opt for reforms not only in the military or industrial sense, but more fundamentally in the nation's political and cultural realms. The sceptical attitude towards the nation's cultural traditions was clearly demonstrated in the critiques of national character and the consequent calls to reform the nation's psychological make-up.

Whereas the usefulness of cultural tradition, in particular Confucianism, was questioned, the movement of learning from the West also invoked its countercurrent to seek other ways to deal with what Levenson calls the tension between history and value, or what Dirlik describes as the oppositions between the past and the West. Such a countercurrent, manifested as an intellectual urge to safeguard tradition, is interpreted by Levenson as being prompted by an emotional and nationalistic attachment to history while assuming a compelling and rational scepticism towards the value of tradition.

This interpretation is limited in a way that it does not represent cultural pluralism, for the cultural pluralist's plea for preservation of a national essence or spirit is not just nationalistic, but rather based on his belief in the value of tradition and the co-existence of different cultures.⁹⁴ In the eyes of these cultural pluralists, the past should never be arbitrarily negated, with or without its supposed opposition—the West.

Admittedly, as Tu Weiming rightly pointed out, Levenson's analysis was not intended to exclude the possibility that “an original thinker in modern China might still find meaning in the Confucian tradition not only for emotional gratification but also for intellectual identification.”⁹⁵ Yet, the concept of “culturalism” has been questioned for its incapability to distinguish itself as a form of identification different from ethnic or national ones.⁹⁶ James Townsend also pointed out that the thesis might have over-stated the dominance of culturalism in imperial times, and overlooked the crisis of political authority in the modern era.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Axel Schneider, “Reconciling History with the Nation? Historicity, National Particularity, and the Question of Universals,” *Historiography East and West*, Vol.1 (2003), pp. 117-136.

⁹⁵ See Tu Wei-Ming, “Hsiung Shih-li’s Quest for Authentic Existence,” in Charlotte Furth (ed.), *The Limits of Change*, pp. 242-275: 245.

⁹⁶ Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation”, p. 2.

⁹⁷ Townsend, “Chinese Nationalism”, pp. 123-124.

In what has been described as a paradigm shift from culturalism to nationalism, it remains to be debated whether the crisis of cultural identity has led to such a fundamental challenge towards the belief in tradition that a cultural metamorphosis has been triggered. However, the rise of Chinese nationalism since the late Qing period was a significant phenomenon without question. It is also a widely noted phenomenon that this nationalism was characteristically accompanied by a cultural iconoclasm and anti-traditionalism (*fan chuantong zhuyi*) such as demonstrated in the 1919 May Fourth Movement.⁹⁸

Appropriation of the Past: Anti-traditionalism and Its Counter-current

In the negotiation of the relationship between the past and the West, many May Fourth intellectuals, in order to rescue the nation from foreign intrusion, opted for “useful” Western knowledge rather than traditional wisdom that was deemed no longer able to help them realize their nationalistic dreams. Between the two Others, the search of the Self resulted in an apparent preference for the Western Other in the cultural imagination for the nation’s future. It seemed that the past as the sacred tradition was not only debunked, but also had to be negated in order for the new Self to be born.

A negative attitude towards the past, or anti-traditionalism, has never been a particular Chinese phenomenon. In fact, it was an integral part of the European Enlightenment. Anti-traditionalism, together with its dialectic reactions of various sorts, have been described by Benjamin Schwartz as a spectrum of “the triad of conservatism/liberalism/radicalism” in European cultural scenes.⁹⁹ This contested description has found its way in the understanding of Chinese intellectual thoughts. Intellectual attitudes towards the past—cultural tradition in general and Confucianism in particular—have been employed as a key criteria to identify different schools of thought and to place them within the same spectrum of conservatism/liberalism/radicalism.

At one end of this spectrum, anti-traditionalism was a cultural standpoint taken by most May Fourth nationalists. Such an attitude was closely linked to the movement of learning from the West in two ways. While in the Chinese cultural and intellectual

⁹⁸ See Lin Yusheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

⁹⁹ Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism”, p. 5.

traditions, the precedent had always enjoyed a respectful status as the model for the present; in the May Fourth era, it was replaced by the West as an exemplar for the present Self. The past, then, was viewed with a sense of disappointment and even resentment. Secondly, among all schools of Western thought available to Chinese intellectuals, the Enlightenment mentality, with its inherent negative attitude towards the past, was the major part of what they selected and absorbed.

Against this background, the critical examination of tradition gave rise to the question of national character. In the eyes of cultural reformers, the people are bearers of national characteristics; and for the sake of national survival, they should be called upon to renew themselves and to reform the national character completely. Studies have shown such a point of view in the cultural proposals of, for example, Chen Duxiu, one of the leading May Fourth intellectuals.¹⁰⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, for those held on to historical continuity of one way or another, it was nothing but a suicidal act to condemn the national character, the national essence, or the national spirit—if all the past had been meaningless, the national life and existence itself became meaningless as well. In terms of the question of national character, the refusal of these intellectuals to attribute social and political problems to cultural tradition is expressed through their pleas to preserve the national essence, or the national spirit.

Chinese intellectuals with a conservative attitude towards the past have been placed on the cultural spectrum as conservatives. However, although they share many characteristics with Western conservatives, to whom the triad spectrum had been applied originally, it is questionable whether the label of conservatism is able to capture their differences with their Western counterparts. For instance, although they were generally specific about which cultural elements are to be preserved, unlike Western conservatives who usually approve of the prevailing sociopolitical status quo, as Schwartz noted, they often become vague or highly selective in approving of the current sociopolitical order as a whole.¹⁰¹ In this sense, it can be said that modern Chinese conservatism is largely cultural and not sociopolitical conservatism. Moreover, modern Chinese conservatism is associated with a nationalism that is much more dominant than the nationalism usually implied in Western conservatism: it is

¹⁰⁰ See Lin Yusheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness*.

¹⁰¹ Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism”, p. 16.

accompanied by intensive emotions such as pride and frustration.¹⁰²

Yet the most fundamental problematic of the term conservatism in describing intellectual perceptions against anti-traditionalism is that, for many labelled under the rubric of conservatism, their belief in cultural tradition and historical continuity has been more existential than nationalistic. So-called conservative intellectuals, such as Xiong Shili (1885-1968) and Liang Shuming (1893-1988), were primarily concerned with issues of human existence as modern individuals.¹⁰³ This applies to intellectuals associated with the Guocui school,¹⁰⁴ for instance, Zhang Taiyan (1868-1936)¹⁰⁵, as well as the Xueheng school,¹⁰⁶ such as historian Liu Yizheng (1880-1956).¹⁰⁷

Therefore, it has to be noted that their conservative approaches do not necessarily indicate a reject of change, but rather a “conservative approach to cultural continuity”.

¹⁰⁸ Chen Yinke, for one, firmly believed in a “continuity by change”.¹⁰⁹ Such a way of interpreting the past, consciously or not, should be read as attempts to open up possibilities of imagining alternative modernities beyond the Western model.

Thus, the counter-current of anti-traditionalism should not simply be dealt with as a form of conservatism. Taking into account the international dimension and the historical dimension, it would be more precise to study the rejection of anti-traditionalism in the light of cultural nationalism.

¹⁰² Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism”, p. 16.

¹⁰³ See Tu Wei-Ming, “Hsiung Shih-li’s Quest”, p. 249. Guy Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shuming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley [etc.]; London: University of California Press, 1979).

¹⁰⁴ See Tze-Ki Hon, *Revolution as Restoration: Guocui xuebao and Chinese Nationalist Modernity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

¹⁰⁵ See Viren Murthy, “Equalization as Difference: Zhang Taiyan’s Buddhist-Daoist Response to Modern Politics,” *IIAS Newsletter*, June 2007, pp. 24-25. Viren Murthy, “The Politics of Fengjian in Late Qing and Early Republican China,” in Kai-wing Chow, Tze-ki Hon and Hung-yok Ip (eds.), *Modernities as Local Practices, Nationalism, and Cultural Production: Deconstructing the May-Fourth Paradigm on Modern China* (Lexington Books, 2008). Viren Murthy, *The Political Philosophy of Zhang Taiyan: the Resistance of Consciousness* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

¹⁰⁶ See Tze-Ki Hon, “From Babbitt to ‘Bai Bide’: Interpretations of New Humanism in *Xueheng*,” in Tze-Ki Hon (co-edited with Kai-wing Chow, Hung-yok Ip, and Don C. Price), *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Lexington Books, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ See Schneider, “History and Ethics”, pp. 12-19.

¹⁰⁸ Laurence Schneider, *Ku Chieh-kang and China’s New History* (Berkeley, CA [etc.]: University of California Press, 1971), p. 33.

¹⁰⁹ Schneider, “Between Dao and History”, p. 70.

The Meaning of the Confucian Revival

Returning to the reform era, the search for a cultural identity has gone through dramatic changes in terms of the attitude towards the past. Critical examinations of traditional culture in the 1980s were reflected in the discourse of national character, which questioned the usefulness of the past. And the 1990s witnessed an intellectual and cultural twist that has given rise to a counter-current of anti-traditionalism.

Many have attempted to interpret this recent return of Confucianism and cultural tradition in China. One of the most important intellectuals involved in the “Confucian revival”, Tu Weiming, contends that it is to be explained in the relationship between the center and periphery of a cultural China. His notion of “cultural China” is comprised of three symbolic universes: the first includes cultural and ethnic Chinese in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the second includes the Chinese diaspora around the world, i.e. overseas Chinese (*hua qiao*), and the third consists of foreigners who understand China intellectually and have shaped the international discourse on cultural China.

Tu Weiming argues that within these three symbolic universes of cultural China, the center is weakened. That is, the historical and cultural center—so-called “China proper”—of mainland China has become less legitimate and increasingly incapable of representing Chinese culture, due to its political nationalism and cultural iconoclasm. The other sense of the weakened center is that intellectuals in “China proper” have lost their bearings as cultural transmitters, and have been marginalized from the center of the political arena.¹¹⁰ At the same time, the periphery—intellectuals outside “China proper”—have shaped the changing landscape of cultural China and even taken the leading role in the intellectual discourse. However, owing to cultural root-seeking and de-politicized debate on a global scale, as he believes, there has been fruitful interaction between Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism in cultural China.

Based on this thesis, Tu observes the return of interests in tradition and Confucianism with a sense of optimism. He sees the question of cultural identity, or the meaning of being Chinese, as “a human concern pregnant with ethical-religious implications”.¹¹¹ This ethical-religious humanism embodied in Confucianism might challenge the

¹¹⁰ Tu, “Cultural China”, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Tu, “Cultural China”, p. 34.

Enlightenment mentality of the modern West, and its religiousness and transcendence to challenge instrumental rationality.

Tu's concept of cultural China was questioned by Arif Dirlik who suspects that it reduces diversity and differences within local cultures. What is more, Dirlik believes Tu's efforts to transplant an alien culture elsewhere resemble the "missionary" ambition with a risk of overthrowing one cultural hegemony while substituting it with another.¹¹² The thesis of cultural center and periphery seems also problematic to Dirlik, for, if one looks at the global picture, Tu's cultural periphery is very much empowered by the global cultural center—the West.¹¹³

While Dirlik seems to suggest that Confucian revival could be seen as native culture against cultural hegemony with its indigenous subjectivity, yet the self-assertiveness of "the Orientals" against Western domination might also consolidate Western ideological hegemony by internalizing the historical assumptions of Orientalism, discussed earlier as self-orientalization. As Dirlik contends, Orientalism persists even within its rejection as long as the assertiveness of autonomous values are still confined by the temporalities and spatialities of a Eurocentric conceptualization of the world.¹¹⁴ Alternatively, Dirlik proposes to "restore full historicity" to the understanding of the past and the present, historicity that is "informed by the complexity of everyday life which accounts for diversity in space and time".¹¹⁵ To him, alternative modernities have to take as the point of departure a present of concrete everyday cultural practices.

Undoubtedly, the implications of the Confucian revival are to be explored not simply in the cultural realm, but by taking into consideration its social and political context. Yet if we focus on the question of cultural identity, the Confucian revival can certainly be described as a counter-discourse of national character.

While the national character discourse holds cultural tradition responsible for the country's lack of development, Confucianism has returned to the spotlight with a much more optimistic color—it has been seen as the most remarkable source to the search of a cultural identity. If the national character discourse has set its reference to the West, arguing along a universalist line, Confucian revival emphasizes the significance of tradition in its own right, which coincides with the global search for particularity.

¹¹² Dirlik, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 109.

¹¹³ Dirlik, "Chinese History and Orientalism", pp. 115-116.

¹¹⁴ Dirlik, "Culture Against History?", pp. 184-185.

¹¹⁵ Dirlik, "Chinese History and Orientalism", p. 118.

Consequently, whereas critiques of national character have been accompanied by a sense of self-loathing, tradition seems to have come back with resumed glory and pride.

The meaning of Confucian revival will be studied in this research with the assistance of theoretical assumptions, such as the ones of Tu and Dirlik, and more importantly, within “China proper” and by restoring its “full historicity”. This is because the voices from the allegedly Chinese cultural center are almost absent from the global center of intellectual discourse, and studies of such voices are rarely seen in English language researches on Chinese cultural identity.

Using the discourse of national character as its entry point, this research aims to fill in this gap by exploring the dynamics of Chinese self-perceptions through the cultural imaginations of representative intellectuals, thereby shedding light on the complexity of cultural forces behind the seemingly paradoxical search for a Chinese identity.

1.6. Dissertation Structure

Chapter One introduces the central question and the key concepts around the question, such as national character, nationalism and national identity. It explains how I define them in the present research, as well as my approach to answer the question(s), by outlining the main theoretical and empirical resources.

By taking *Chinese Characteristics* as the point of departure, Chapter Two offers a close examination of the national character discourse at the end of the 19th and early 20th century. Through the analysis of Smith’s critiques, this chapter introduces the most important features of Western perceptions of Chinese culture. It then traces the development of such a discourse within the Chinese context by studying the ideal personality as imagined by Liang Qichao, one of the two most important advocates of national character reforms of Smith’s time. Liang’s cultural proposal provides an ideal case to study the multifold rationales and dynamics of intellectual visions, both of his own and those of his successors, for the nation and its place in the world.

The next three chapters deal with Chinese self-perceptions in the reform era by studying three different attitudes towards national character, cultural tradition and Confucianism. Chapter Three discusses the critiques of national character by placing

them in their historical and international contexts. Chapter Four and Five turn to the cultural standpoints opposing the discourse of national character, and examine two forms of rejection to anti-traditionalism and the self-negation mentality as represented by two mainland scholars respectively.

Chapter Three analyzes how perceptions of the national Self were influenced by imaginations of the Western Other through two cases: *Wolf Totem* and the thoughts of the popular cultural critic Wang Xiaofeng. To provide a historical context to the contemporary discourse of national character, it goes on to study the anti-traditional critical inquiries of the 1980s, such as *River Elegy*, and link them to those of the May Fourth Movement. Furthermore, this chapter also explores the relationship between the negation of tradition and the belief in the universality of Western cultural values, and in doing so, offers an international dimension to the understanding of Chinese discourse of national character.

The first form of rejection to the discourse of national character is analyzed by studying the cultural viewpoints of philosopher Chen Lai, a scholar of Confucian philosophy and thought. In Chapter Four, his perception of Chinese culture is unfolded in his defence of Confucianism as a way of holding up to a sort of cultural and historical continuity. Chen Lai points to the theoretical flaws in the concept of national character and offers his own interpretation of the cultural phenomenon targeted by cultural critics. He also promotes a “cultural subjectivity” (*wenhua de zhutixing*) to counter the “inferiority complex” that he detects from Chinese cultural critiques analyzed earlier in this research.

Similarly, historian Qin Hui also rejects the national character discourse and views Confucianism as a positive cultural legacy. Yet he does so from a perspective that is rather different from that of Chen Lai’s. Regarded by himself and many others as a firm believer of liberalism, Qin refutes the employment of the national character concept in socio-historical and cultural studies, for he sees it as a sort of “cultural determinism”. Chapter Five analyzes how he, from the standpoint of a liberal cultural pluralist, argues against a liberal universalist view of Chinese culture and how he tries to combine liberalism and Confucianism in his vision of Chinese culture.

Finally, Chapter Six concludes with the findings from previous chapters and further demonstrates that various attitudes towards the discourse of national character reflect contending visions of the country’s cultural present and future. The tension among

such different perceptions suggests that the century-old quest for a cultural identity remains an ongoing process influenced by both historical and international factors.