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**Author:** Shu, Chunyan  
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Chapter 4. Chen Lai’s “Cultural Subjectivity”

As has been discussed so far, the criticism of Chinese national character has been closely linked to the negation of cultural tradition, especially Confucian thought and values. Such critiques attribute the nation’s many negative characteristics to Confucianism and the socio-cultural structure of a Confucian society, perceiving them as the ultimate obstacle towards the country’s modernization. Following such a line of thinking, many hold firmly to the belief that, only by breaking away from Confucian tradition, can the nation be improved. What is more, such improvement has been predominantly oriented towards a path leading to a universal modernity, which, for the time being, is only manifested in the modern West.

Such an analytical framework and such a view of Chinese culture and tradition has been described by many of its critics as radical. In a spectrum of “the triad of conservatism, liberalism and radicalism”\(^{434}\), if we temporarily set aside all the limitations of such a triadic concept for the sake of clarification, the discourse of national character as analyzed in the previous chapter can be said to represent a cultural position of radicalism, in the sense that it argues to break away from tradition and to replace it with something drastically different, not to mention that it indicates a revolutionary change in the thoughts, behavior, and the very personality of a vast nation.

Because of its implication of historical discontinuity, this cultural radicalism has evoked rejections of various degrees. For example, in his defense of Confucianism, Tu Weiming argues that tradition has “shaped Chineseness throughout history”\(^{435}\). He refutes the idea that Confucianism has “nurtured a national character detrimental to China’s modernization”, and describes those who make such an accusation as “Westernized intellectuals”\(^ {436}\). Tu is not alone in this regard. Many have rejected the discourse of national character as radical anti-traditionalism and/or total Westernization by disassociating Confucian thought with China’s traumatic process of modernization.

This research will now turn to the perspective of those at the other side of the cultural

\(^{434}\) Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism”, p. 16.

\(^{435}\) Tu, “Cultural China”, p. 27.

\(^{436}\) Tu, “Cultural China”, p. 27.
spectrum. Their voices of the so-called cultural conservatives may not have been the most prominent, especially in the May Fourth period and during the culture fever of the 1980s; however, their perceptions of tradition and its role in modern society have drawn growing attention in recent years. Overseas intellectuals of the new-Confucian school (haiwai xin rujia), such as Tu Weiming, have aided the efforts made by mainland New Confucians with whom they share a common cultural viewpoint against anti-traditionalism. Though the advocates of cultural tradition, such as scholars associated with the Academy of Chinese Culture, had already voiced their concerns with radicalism (jijin zhuyi) in the late 1980s, it was in the 1990s that the landscape of mainland cultural realm took a conservative shift. It is noted that the talk of “ugly national character” had then shifted towards a reconstruction of national culture and rediscovery of the national spirit.

An important feature of this shift is that these so-called cultural conservatives are joined by intellectuals of various political and economic schools in their rejection of cultural radicalism. Among them are intellectuals loosely labeled as, for example, Marxist historians, post-modernists, so-called New-Left intellectuals, and Chinese liberals. Admittedly, all of these terms are problematic, some are overlapping, and each deserves further clarification and explanation. Yet in the eyes of the advocates of national character reform, they seem to have converged culturally into a united front, despite their possibly rather divergent intentions and perspectives.

With the complexity and subtlety of this shift in mind, this chapter will focus on the cultural propositions of the mainland philosopher Chen Lai (b. 1952), a scholar who specializes in Confucian philosophy and thought. Chen Lai has actively participated in cultural debates around the role of Confucianism in modern society since the 1980s. He was involved in the culture fever both as one of the editors of *Culture: China and the World* and as a scholar closely related to the Academy of Chinese Culture; and since the 1990s, he has become the most vocal and representative voice of Confucian philosophy in mainland China. Last but not least, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, his cultural viewpoints have also been influenced by overseas intellectuals of the new-Confucian school such as Tu Weiming. Therefore, a close examination of his

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perception of Chinese culture will best serve the purpose of understanding the rejection of the discourse of national character as a whole as well as its multifold rationales.

Chen studies Confucian thought from the perspective of cultural philosophy as well as intellectual and cultural history. His research covers the history of Confucian thought ranging from antiquity to the Song and Ming dynasties, till the movement of new-Confucianism (xin rujia) of the present day. He has published extensively on various issues regarding Confucian philosophy, its history and modern impact, many of which extend far beyond the scope and focus of this study. Here I only examine the texts that are crucial to the understanding of his cultural viewpoints with regard to the discourse of national character and Chinese self-perceptions.

Research material for this chapter is mainly comprised of two parts: a personal interview with Chen Lai in Beijing on February 25th, 2011, and important texts directly related to the discourse of national character and the problem of Chinese-Western cultural exchanges. For example, his 2006 book Tradition and Modernity, which was later translated into English, includes a selection of his essays written in the years from 1987 to 1999, dealing mainly with Chinese and Western cultures, as well as the role of Confucianism as a humanistic value system in a modern society. His other monographs and essays are also included, wherever they contribute to the reading of Chen’s ideas on the national character and the position of Confucianism vis-à-vis Western cultures.

4.1. National Character or National Spirit

Before we begin to study Chen Lai’s ideas on the national character discourse, it is important to take a brief look at his academic background. Chen Lai received his doctoral degree at Peking University (1985), where he worked for almost three decades at the Department of Philosophy. As Professor of Chinese Philosophy at Peking University (1990-2009) and Tsinghua University (since 2009), he has held key positions as Director of the Research Centre for Confucianism, Peking University; and then as Dean of Tsinghua Academy of Chinese Learning (qinghua guoxue yuan), Tsinghua University. He also worked as a visiting scholar at many universities in the

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U.S., Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Reading through Chen’s texts, it is not difficult to encounter ideas and methodologies drawn from, to various extents, neo-rational Confucian philosophy of the Song and Ming dynasties, the more recent new-Confucianism of the 20th century, Marxist philosophy, as well as theories of, for example, German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). In fact, many of his ideas are established and unfolded through engaging in continuous dialogues with cultural philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists both in China and the West.

Among the many scholars whose ideas have had an impact on Chen’s philosophy, Feng Youlan (1895-1990) has been referred to by Chen Lai as his teacher. Chen regards Feng as one of the most outstanding contemporary Chinese philosophers, to whom one of his monographs was dedicated. Feng, himself a student of John Dewey, was best known for his work A History of Chinese Philosophy. Feng developed his new rational philosophy, or “new philosophy of principle” (xin lixue), from the study of “neo-Confucian” philosophers of Song and Ming dynasties, while at the same time drawing from Western philosophical traditions. It is from Feng’s metaphysical and cultural writings that Chen Lai draws discussions of the relation between “the universal” and “the particular” to defend historical continuity and past wisdom.

Another important scholar who inspired Chen Lai’s understanding of the contemporary movement of New Confucianism is Tu Weiming, retired Harvard-Yenching Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy and of Confucian Studies. Tu’s theory of the “third epoch of Confucianism” has been seen as representative of the most recent Confucian revival and an inspiration to contemporary Confucian scholars like Chen. As Chen noted himself, during his stay as a visiting scholar at Harvard University from 1986 to 1988, he has been especially influenced by Tu’s ideas on the modern transformation of

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444 Van Dongen, Goodbye Radicalism!, pp. 221-224.

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Taking into account Chen’s intellectual background, it is no wonder that he takes a clear and firm stance in the defense of Confucian thought and values. Such a cultural position is very clearly stated in his rejection of the discourse of national character. Like with many other of his thoughts, Chen Lai’s critiques of the anti-traditional discourse of national character are also best examined through his dialogue with the thoughts of Chinese and Western intellectuals.

1) The National Character: the Limits of Guomin Xing

In Chen Lai’s understanding, the discourse of national character (guomin xing), such as in Arthur Smith’s Chinese Characteristics, the peasant personality in Lu Xun’s stories, and “the ugly Chinaman” in Bo Yang’s book, refers only to certain temporary traits of people as a result of their often difficult political, economic and educational situations. It means that once the condition changes, many of the negative characteristics under critique will change as well. Therefore, according to Chen, the concept of guomin xing, as conceived in the minds of its critics, is highly limited: it is drawn from observations, though not necessarily false, often made in a temporary setting and a polemic fashion. Therefore, its underlying assumptions run the risk of being hasty and judgmental.

Chen perceives Arthur Smith as more of an anthropologist rather than a missionary, and his observations as essentially anthropological descriptions. Thus, Smith’s critiques should be viewed as part of Western anthropological studies around the world. However, by placing Smith’s texts in the context of Western global expansion, Chen reminds us of the imperial and colonial background against which Chinese Characteristics was produced. Whereas many of these anthropological conclusions are grounded on detailed observations, Chen further elaborates, they are often reductive and one-sided—they stress certain aspects while neglecting others.

For the same reason, Chen contends that Lu Xun’s criticism of the national character needs to be critically revaluated. In fact, Chen believes that the influence of such foreign anthropological observations as those of Smith’s, added to Lu’s crisis

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446 Chen, Youwu Zhi Jing, afterword.
447 Interview with Chen Lai on February 25th, 2011.
448 Interview with Chen Lai.
consciousness (*wenti yishi*), makes Lu’s critiques of the national character problematic:

*Lu Xun should not have viewed Chinese culture from a foreign perspective, especially anthropological perspective. By only focusing on the manifested outer layer (*biaoceng*) in a temporary social culture, one cannot grasp the meaning of Chinese national personality. Lu’s national character critique is an expression of his dissatisfaction with social reality around his time... Though to hold on to the negative aspects might stimulate people to work on the problems, it should not be understood as an overall description of a nation.*\(^{449}\)

The typical example of the reductionist image depicted in Lu Xun’s work, as Chen sees it, is the peasant figure Ah Q, which is far from adequate to grasp the characteristics of the Chinese peasantry during the 20th century. To Chen, Lu Xun might have truthfully depicted certain negative aspects, but at the same time neglected other positive characteristics such as sincerity, generosity, and benevolence (*kuanhou*). More importantly, taking into account that Lu Xun might have based these descriptions on his personal experiences, the image of Ah Q, often seen as representative of a large group of peasants, can in the eyes of Chen Lai never represent the peasants “who fought through the anti-Japanese war, and who have supported the whole process of China’s revolution and development”\(^{450}\).

Chen Lai’s reading of the image of Ah Q suggests that he finds two tendencies problematic in the discourse of national character: one is the impact of foreign perspective that might have affected the Chinese observer’s standpoint; the other is the elitist view that reduces the positive aspect of the masses in the nation’s development. Instead of taking these characteristics out of their national and historical contexts, Chen is in favor of placing the issue of national character within its social settings, and in doing so, looking for an interpretation from a Chinese perspective.

Compared to what Chen regards as one-sided anthropological descriptions of the national characteristics, which are confined within a certain time and under certain conditions, Chen’s own perception of the Chinese nation and its innate character is better understood in his analysis of the cultural philosophical approach of Liang Shuming (1893-1988) and the sociological approach of Max Weber.

\(^{449}\) Interview with Chen Lai.

\(^{450}\) Interview with Chen Lai.
The cultural philosopher Liang Shuming was best known for his *Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies*. But Chen examines Liang’s view on the national character by reading his *The Essentials of Chinese Culture*, a monograph on the structure of the ancient society and its value system. In this book, Liang summarized from previous descriptions what he regarded as an accurate portrait of the Chinese people, and listed the following ten points of the national character:

1. Selfish and self-profiting,
2. Parsimonious,
3. Liking to talk with deference,
4. Peaceful and mild,
5. Knowing how to be satisfied when one has enough,
6. Maintaining tradition,
7. Muddled,
8. Steadfast and ruthless,
9. Tenacious and flexible,
10. Skillful and conscientious.

Chen categorizes these ten points, together with other characteristics discussed in Liang’s book, into three groups. The first group describes what Chen calls “the external characteristics”, such as large landmass and population, a long history, a stable social structure, and so on. The other two groups are more intrinsic to Chinese culture: the second group concerns the clan system and the moral atmosphere, among others, which are perceived from a positive angle; and the third group lists certain features from a negative angle, such as the lack of scientific spirit, of democracy, of liberty or equality, of religious view of human life, and of a nation-state.

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451 Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *Dongxi wenhua jiqi zhexue* 东西文化及其哲学 (Beijing: caizhengbu yinshuju, 1921).
453 This is the English translation of Liang’s ten points by Edmund Ryden, see Chen, *Tradition and Modernity*, p. 310.
While studying these descriptions, Chen is very much aware that these items, especially the ones defined as lacking in Chinese culture, are “clearly dependent on a comparison with Western culture”.\footnote{Chen, “Chapter Thirteen: Liang and Weber”, p. 287.} Chen does not reject such a comparison, but he shares Liang’s reasoning that their absences are mostly determined by the Chinese social structure. What Chen is mostly interested in is Liang’s explanation as to why such a difference exists. The conclusion of Liang’s study suggested that the differences between Chinese and Western cultures is due to the differences in the structures of traditional societies, which in itself is a result of different religious development.

Chen then goes on to compare Liang’s analysis with that of German sociologist Max Weber’s. The latter discussed various aspects of the Chinese national character as “a life orientation”.\footnote{See Max Weber, translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth, \textit{The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism} (Glencoe: Free Press, 1951). For the part on “Life Orientation” see “Chapter VI. The Confucian Life Orientation”, pp. 142-170.} Chen gathers the scattered descriptions from Weber’s book and lists the following 13 points:

1. Confucian Chinese maintain a this-worldly spiritual tendency and emphasize blessings, gains and long life in this world.
2. Chinese people have a strong desire for profit and this has been developed to a peak since ancient times.
4. Chinese people’s parsimony and work ability have constantly been seen as unrivaled.
5. An extraordinary virtue of temperance.
7. Concerned with outward appearance and formal respect; care about face.
8. Keep to traditional observances.
11. Very dishonest, but big business puts a special value on trust.
12. Lack sympathy.
13. No mutual trust.\footnote{This is the English translation of Chen’s list by Ryden, see Chen, “Chapter Thirteen: Liang and Weber”, pp. 311-2.}
As Weber himself noted, his analysis, like those of many other sociologists of his time, drew heavily on the accounts of missionaries. Therefore, Chen does not hesitate to state that, in comparison, Liang’s view and understanding of Chinese culture is “much deeper” and “more accurate” than Weber’s.\(^{457}\) Chen continues to argue that Liang’s description of Chinese society is more complete and more to the point:

*Liang’s vision is much broader, because the question he addresses is how Chinese culture as a whole responded to modernity and that of the status of Chinese culture within the cultural history of the world.*\(^{458}\)

Liang’s vision and the question he addressed are apparently much closer to Chen Lai’s intellectual concern. In fact, Chen has been inspired by many cultural conceptions from the works of Liang.\(^{459}\) However, Chen Lai finds it problematic that Liang used the term “national character” (*guomin xing*) as an expression of the structure of Chinese society and its cultural tendencies.\(^{460}\) To Chen, Weber’s “life orientation” is a better term than Liang’s “national character”, for it expressed nothing more than the mentality that emerges under the constraints of a given cultural atmosphere.

Having said that, while agreeing with much of the analysis of Liang and Weber more than the anthropological descriptions from Arthur Smith and Lu Xun, Chen finally pointed out that neither Weber or Liang distinguished between what was rooted in tradition and belonged to the cultural matrix (the eternal), and what was merely related to a given society and a given cultural environment (the temporal).

Therefore, to further articulate his understanding of the limited conception of *guomin xing*, Chen employed Feng Youlan’s distinction between “custom” (*xi*) and “essential characteristics” (*xing*). The “custom” points to the changeable characteristics associated with specific social systems and cultural environments. As Chen explains, the terminology *guomin xing* can only be accepted when it is to describe *xi*—if it refers to the temporary behavior and psychological tendency of people of certain historical conditions, in a specific space and time.\(^{461}\) Otherwise, *guomin xing* or the term “national character” is inadequate to describe the “essential characteristics” or *xing*.


\(^{459}\) For example, see Chen Lai 陈来, *Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie—chunqiu shidai de zongjiao, lunli yu shehui sixiang* 古代思想文化的世界——春秋时代的宗教、伦理与社会思想 (Taipei: yunchen wenhua, 2006), p. 10.

\(^{460}\) Chen, “Chapter Thirteen: Liang and Weber”, p. 312.

\(^{461}\) Chen, “Chapter Thirteen: Liang and Weber”, pp. 311-312.
that is, the enduring and stable part of a culture and tradition.

Chen believes it is highly problematic that many critics of the national character (guomin xing) often fail to make the distinction between xi and xing; instead, they confuse the temporary manifestation of certain cultural traits with the innate spirit of a nation. Therefore, the criticism on guomin xing in the sense of Feng’s “custom” often inappropriately leads to the negation of the nation’s tradition and the eternal “essential characteristics”.

The rationale behind Chen Lai’s rejection of such criticism will be further discussed below. Before that, we will first look into Chen’s own perception of Chinese culture and its essential characteristics, that is, the xing he intends to rescue from the critiques of xi—the national character.

2) The True National Spirit: Minzu Xing

It is against what Chen Lai calls the “shallow” concept of guomin xing that he interprets his own understanding of the true national spirit—minzu xing. Chen believes that the spirit of a nation does not change easily with time and social conditions. On the contrary, the national spirit, having formed from antiquity to the present day, transcends political and economic situations and represents the eternal personality inherent in a nation.

As Chen clarifies himself, his conception of minzu xing resembles what Ruth Benedict, author of The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, called “ethos”. It entails the main theme of a culture, or in other words, the national spirit in a cultural sense (wenhua de minzu jingshen).462 From this perspective, the cultural anthropological term of “ethos” is better translated into Chinese as spiritual temperament (jingshen qizhi), national spirit (minzu jingshen), or cultural spirit (wenhua jingshen), rather than national character (guomin xing).

The most important distinction between national character (guomin xing) and national spirit (minzu xing), in Chen’s understanding, lies in the endurance and transcendence of the latter. While critics of the national character resent it as a chronic illness of the nation, Chen views these often negative personalities and traits as having temporarily

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emerged from social and historical confinements; in his conception, the values and moral preferences that have survived—the national spirit—should be seen as positive historical legacies.

Yet there is one thing that critics of the national character and Chen Lai share, that is, they both refer to Confucianism. Critics attribute the ills in national character to Confucianism, and Chen searches for the national spirit in Confucianism. Critics accuse Confucianism of hindering the country’s road towards modernization, while Chen contends that Confucianism and modernity are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in Chen’s defense of Confucianism and its values, the key to his argument is the compatibility of Confucian thought (or tradition) with modernity. Vice versa, when Chen argues that Confucianism is not at odds with modernity, he naturally holds on to the idea that Confucian values are at least part of the transcendent national spirit, if not more.

Chen Lai traces the origin of the Chinese spiritual temperament (qizhi) back to Western Zhou culture, before the time of Confucius. Following that, in the time of what Karl Jaspers calls “the Axial Age”, which Chen uses to describe the global context of Confucianism in its making, this spiritual temperament developed further. Chen argues that such quality or charisma gradually formed the fundamental personality (jiben renge) of Chinese culture. Based on his understanding of Western Zhou culture and Confucian thought, Chen contends that it is this spiritual temperament or “ethos” that became the origin and foundation of Confucian thought.

To be more specific, Chen identifies four important constituents of the national spirit and the fundamental personality that have manifested themselves in Confucian values: emphasis on filial piety, intimate human relations, the value of people and respect for morality (zhongxiao, qinren, guimin, chongde). If the many points listed by Liang Shuming and Max Weber fall into the category of the conditional and historical guomin xing, these four Confucian values in Chen’s eyes represent the essential characteristics of Chinese culture, the true national spirit as minzu xing.

Thus, to grasp Chen’s conception of minzu xing, it is necessary to further explore his understanding of Confucian thought as a set of humanistic values that do not act as obstacles to modernity or the process of modernization. To prove the transcendence of

Confucian values and of the national spirit, Chen takes a few steps to argue against what critics of Confucianism call its incompatibility with modernity.

First of all, Chen believes that there is a natural connection between tradition and modernity. The development of modern civilization is the unification (tongyi) of continuity and change, and not the break between tradition and modernity. This point of view is expressed through his critical evaluation of Weber’s theory. As Chen points out, the discussion of Confucian culture and modernity since the 1960s has been held within the framework of Weber’s “Protestant ethic thesis”. Weber attributed the development of capitalism in the West to the Protestant work ethic. His thesis argues that, while the Protestants’ hard work is prompted by inner anxiety and tension, which is caused by the urge to be salvaged by God; such anxiety and tension do not exist in Confucian culture. This is the fundamental reason why traditional Chinese society was not able to develop into a modern industrial civilization. Following this Weberian logic, Chen concludes, Confucian values would be perceived as incompatible with modernity.

Chen Lai challenges such a conclusion by arguing that Confucian tradition, as proven by the recent development of industrial East Asia, at least does not stand against economic development, though Chen does not attempt to establish a positive link between the two either. He quotes Tu Wei-ming in suggesting that, although distinctively different from Western cultural values, Confucian ethics in a free and open environment are just as able to act as a positive and creative spirit as other value systems. Consequently, Confucian tradition and modernity are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Secondly, Chen admits that the inner problematic of Confucianism, as of any other ethic-religious system, lies in its incapability to act as an instrumental force to social development. However, if one looks beyond the Weberian rationale concerning the relationship between traditional culture and economic development, Chen contends,

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Confucianism as a humanistic value should not be evaluated according to its functionality in political economy. Instead, Confucianism should be perceived as an autonomous cultural force free from any instrumental standard.

In arguing for such cultural autonomy, he borrows Weber’s own terms to differentiate two sets of standards in evaluating cultural values: the standard of “value rationality” (jiazhi lixing) and that of “instrumental rationality” (gongju lixing). The existence of Confucianism as “value rationality” should be independent from its impact, either negative or positive, on the development of capitalism. That is to say, even if it does not contribute to economic development, it should not be labeled as the opposite of modernity, for modernization should not only be seen as economic function alone and “modern culture is not only a culture of ‘instrumental rationality’”.

Thirdly, among all existing traditions, Chen regards Confucianism as the most apt to be transformed within a modern society, for it is essentially a worldly and humanistic tradition. As this humanistic perspective is not founded on the doctrine of God, the development of science does not severely challenge or jeopardize Confucianism in the way it has challenged other religious traditions. On the contrary, the worldly concern of Confucianism as a religio-moral philosophy is very much in line with modern humanistic movements, holding the harmony of human relations as its ultimate value.

Furthermore, Confucianism has, in Chen’s words, a human-relations orientation, which values responsibility over liberty and rights, and the community over the individual. This does not mean that Confucianism opposes the interests of the individual; rather, it places individual rights within their context of a larger community. This orientation, and its stress on community, as Chen suggests, has its significance in overcoming the negative aspects of modernization—extreme rationalization and the consequent alienation of the modern individual.

Based on the above arguments, it is clear that, though Chen Lai admits that Confucianism alone does not represent modern Chinese culture, he holds firmly to the belief that Confucian values are the essential part of the transcendent national spirit—the minzu xing of the Chinese nation. Therefore, it can be said that he is of the

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470 Interview with Chen Lai.

471 Interview with Chen Lai.
opinion that nothing but Confucianism is able to represent the national spirit, and no figure other than Confucius can represent the fundamental Chinese personality.\textsuperscript{472}

Out of the same belief, when a statue of Confucius was placed in front of the National Museum near the Tian’anmen Square in 2011, and much controversy arose, Chen wrote to defend the act. He asserted that Confucius had become a cultural symbol and an irreplaceable representative of the national spirit.\textsuperscript{473} To Chen, the significance of placing this statue at the heart of the nation’s political and culture center is obvious: it is an expression of a cultural identity formed around Confucianism, as well as an affirmation of the revival of traditional culture, of which mainland China is the main driving force.\textsuperscript{474}

Chen Lai’s perception of \textit{minzu xing} is to a certain extent a development of Feng Youlan’s theory of a Chinese spiritual tradition.\textsuperscript{475} At the same time, it is also reminiscent of the “spirit of Chinese culture” from Tang Junyi (1909-1978), another representative scholar of the New-Confucian school. Tang also advocated the construction of a “self-dictated cultural spirit” (\textit{zizuo zhuzai zhi jingshen qigai}),\textsuperscript{476} and criticized that the lack of cultural confidence in intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun would lead to ignorance of their own culture, despite their intention to stimulate changes.\textsuperscript{477} This is where the viewpoint of Chen Lai differs from the cultural critics analyzed in the previous chapter. Though both acknowledge a long-standing influence of Confucianism on cultural tradition, critics relate it to a negative national character, whereas Chen associates it with the national spirit in a positive light.

With this understanding, we will further explore Chen’s rejection of the national character discourse, not just because the term is understood by Chen as based on limited anthropological observations, but also because it is an important part of the criticism of Confucianism and Chinese national spirit—Chen’s \textit{minzu xing}. Chen Lai’s rescue of \textit{minzu xing} is to be studied from his arguments against the critiques of

\textsuperscript{472} Interview with Chen Lai.
\textsuperscript{473} Interview with Chen Lai.
\textsuperscript{475} Chen, “Chapter One: Retrospect and Prospect”, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{476} Tang Junyi 唐君毅, \textit{Renwen jingshen zhi chongjian} 人文精神之重建 (Guilin: guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 221.
\textsuperscript{477} Tang, \textit{Renwen jingshen zhi chongjian}, p. 257.
4.2. National Character: A Question of Tradition and Modernity

As I have discussed previously, Chen Lai revokes Feng Youlan’s theoretical classification of cultural behaviors and attitudes as the temporary custom (xi) and the essential characteristics (xing). Chen Lai argues that the critics of the national character have established a polemical and reductionist view of a people, despite their intentions to improve the nation’s status quo; when they criticize the cultural manifestations of temporary social problems, they mistakenly target the intrinsic national spirit and point towards cultural tradition and Confucianism.

The discourse of national character, seen from the perspective of Chen Lai, then, should be placed into its wider context of cultural radicalism and anti-traditionalism as seen in 20th century China. This mode of thinking, in Chen Lai’s analysis, has two features: one is its tendency to evaluate ethical and moral values by the yardstick of utility, that is, to judge Confucianism with a utilitarian standard; the other is the crisis consciousness that has manifested itself in such a tendency. Both features are identified by Chen Lai as prominent in the anti-traditional movements of 20th century China, notably seen in the May Fourth Movement and in the 1980s.

1) On the National Character Critique during the May Fourth Movement

The May Fourth Movement in this research refers to, in a broad sense, the New Culture Movement that started in 1915 and was then highlighted during the days around May Fourth, 1919. As Li Zehou puts it, the New Culture Movement is characterized by its objective “to reconstruct the national character and to destroy the old tradition”.\footnote{Li, Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun, p. 7.} In Li’s opinion, the idea behind the New Culture Movement was not fundamentally different from what Liang Qichao advocated in his “new people” thesis, in fact, they are both quite similar, even in their forms.\footnote{Li, Zhongguo xiandai sixiang shilun, p. 4.} Similarly, Chen Lai speaks of the New Culture Movement as an anti-traditional movement with the ambition to completely reform Chinese culture. Although Chen recognizes the significance in its appeal for enlightenment, he criticizes its tendency to place the national character reform, or the
modernization of the people, as the premise of social modernization. This mentality, in his words, is no other than Hegel’s “outdated historical idealism”.

Among the many who advocated the national character reform during the May Fourth Movement, Chen Duxiu was the one that Chen Lai responded to most explicitly. Chen Duxiu, seen as one of “three of China’s most prominent May Fourth figures” together with Lu Xun and Hu Shi, held a radical cultural position of “unbending Westernism”: to eliminate the traditional Chinese pattern of life and thought and to substitute a modern, Western pattern of life and thought. For this reason, Chen Duxiu has been seen as the representative of “anti-traditionalism and iconoclastic totalism” around the May Fourth Movement.

Chen Duxiu believed that there is a fundamental difference in the thought of Eastern and Western nations, which made them incompatible like water and fire. The difference lies in the fact that Western culture is founded on the concepts of liberty, equality and independence; while Chinese culture is based on the three principles of Confucian values, namely “the three bonds”—the relations between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife. This difference, according to Chen Duxiu, is the reason for China’s crisis in its encounter with Western countries. Therefore, the ultimate solution to China’s problems is to awaken the people, and to Chen Duxiu, “the last awakening is the awakening of ethics”, that means, to completely break away from Confucian ethics as the nation’s guiding moral principle.

Chen Lai contends that Chen Duxiu used the instrumental standard to analyse the difference between Eastern and Western nations, and in doing so, he “completely fell into the utilitarianism”, which led to “an unavoidable bias” in his theory. One of the differences Chen Duxiu identified was that “Western nations take war as the base; Oriental nations take tranquillity as the root”. And as Chen Lai puts it, Chen Duxiu

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480 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, pp. 69-70.
486 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 47.
dealt with this difference by “totally uncritically praising the West”:

...he strenuously slanders Eastern culture for its paying attention to peace, forgiveness and cultural upbringing, treating a love of peace as the “root of shameless servile inferiority” of Oriental nations. Hence his ridiculous suggestion that “Oriental nations have the inferior vices of loving peace, appreciating repose and embracing culture”. Chen Duxiu virtually becomes an adorer of war and bloodshed.  

While Chen Lai strongly disagrees with Chen Duxiu’s evaluation of the Chinese national character, especially the latter’s condemnation of “love of peace” as “inferior”, he further analyses it as a good example of cultural radicalism. To answer the question as to why “since May Fourth in the blood of young Chinese intellectuals there has always been a strong sense of an urge to oppose tradition”, Chen Lai points out two major reasons: one is “these young people’s special radical character and immaturity of cultural experience”; the other lies in the sentiment of pain, impatience and powerlessness created by a crisis of the Chinese nation since the Opium Wars. As he explains:

...from the end of nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, after having enjoyed the feeling of superiority of the civilization of “the Middle Kingdom” for over a thousand years, Chinese civilization suddenly came up against the shock of modern Western culture in the form of invasion by imperialism and was reduced to a life and death struggle for survival....The failure of reform at several times in modern history resulted in the feelings of impatience and powerlessness among the few intellectuals...(and) also a desire to find the necessary [sic] causes of these failures in culture...which led to a narrow utilitarianism in cultural matters.  

In this light, Chen Duxiu’s interpretation of peace-loving as a cultural defect was brought about by his consciousness of national crisis and his urge to save the dying nation, which “suppressed his ability to make value judgements” and resulted in his biased cultural view. With the loss of humanist standard for values and ideals, in the

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488 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 44.
489 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 43.
case of Chen Duxiu, “even the way of imperialism and militarism is also acceptable”.

To put Chen Duxiu’s cultural viewpoints in its historical context, Chen Lai points out that during the May Fourth Movement, a crisis mentality and an urgency to save the nation were the overriding concerns of most intellectuals. To them, strengthening the state and the race became an absolute purpose. This explains the popularity of Social Darwinism at the time, which in turn led to utilitarianism even in the cultural realm —”all humanist values not related to enriching and strengthening are to be rejected”.492

In arguing against Chen Duxiu’s radical cultural stance, Chen Lai again borrows Weber’s term of “value rationality” and “instrumental rationality”. According to him, the humanist values of the ideal of peace and cultural awareness, the value rationality, may certainly not be judged according to an external utilitarian standard, i.e. the instrumental rationality.493 As a recent study points out, the two types of rationalities identified here by Chen are somewhat different from Max Weber’s original conception, and the sharp distinction between the two was also not so visible in Weber.494 However, what is important to this research is that Chen employs such a dualist framework to rescue the humanist, religio-spiritual value of Confucianism that he is deeply concerned with, for, as he sees it, what manifested in the critiques of the national character is the loss of cultural autonomy to political pursuits.

2) Anti-traditionalism and criticism towards Confucianism in the 1980s

In a similar vein, Chen Lai stands firmly against what he sees as anti-traditionalism and cultural utilitarianism in the 1980s, for he regards the cultural discussion in the 1980s as the “logical historical continuity” of the May Fourth Movement.495 In the reform era, as he puts it, “culturally we seem to have returned to the starting point of May Fourth”.496 The call for modernization showed that the anxiety or crisis mentality that had been overriding during May Fourth was still lingering in the 1980s, when the stark contrast between the world in and outside resembled much of that at the beginning of the 20th century.

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491 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 48.
492 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 48.
493 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 49.
494 Van Dongen, Goodbye Radicalism!, pp. 201 & 205.
495 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 44.
496 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 44.
In fact, Chen Lai contends that the May Fourth Movement, the Cultural Revolution and the culture discussions in the 1980s share a mode of thinking that is characteristically radical. To put is simply, these three periods demonstrated a preference of “the new” to “the old” and a resolution of “breaking the old to achieve the new”. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the loss of confidence in Confucianism, in Chen Lai’s opinion, has been added by the internalization of Weberian theories with regard to the incapability of Confucianism to promote economic growth and to help realize modernization. It was under such circumstances that a comparison of Eastern and Western cultures led to “a severe attitude towards Confucian culture”:

Intellectuals of the 1980s asked scornfully: Can Confucian Learning really bring about China’s modernization?...this question not only revealed the fundamental reason why Confucian Learning was in an embarrassing predicament since the Opium Wars, it was also the only real challenge that it had faced in the past forty years.\(^\text{497}\)

With the prevalence of modernization, understood generally as rationalization and progress, the question is brought about as to “why do we still need Confucianism if it is useless?”, or put it the other way around, “why should we not abandon Confucianism if, and because, it stands in the way of modernization?” This is a question largely propelled by a wide-spread crisis consciousness, and put forward under the presumption that cultural tradition and moral values have a causal relationship with the socio-political development of a nation.

Chen Lai recognizes the motifs of such a question. He describes that many intellectuals, driven by the feeling of anxiety and a sense of unprecedented urgency, “too easily went the way of a complete denial of the cultural tradition” to avoid being in the state of humiliation.\(^\text{498}\) He summarizes this tendency as cultural radicalism led by utilitarianism, which was clearly demonstrated in what he calls “the third peak of cultural radicalism of the century” as represented by River Elegy:\(^\text{499}\)

The classic form (of cultural radicalism)......is to take Confucianism as

\(^{498}\) Chen, “Chapter Four: Radicalism”, p. 105.
\(^{499}\) Chen, “Chapter Four: Radicalism”, p. 103.
the ideology of an authoritarian system and to imagine that totally
destroying the value system of Confucianism is the premise for
realizing modernization, seeing Confucian Learning as the root cause
of the failure to resolve all practical issues and so criticize it. Their
fault is the same as that of the May Fourth critics...The theories of
radicalism ascribed all China’s problems to Confucius, Confucianism
or the vast land of China, making practical (xianshi) issues into those
of tradition, structural (zhidu) issues into cultural ones.\(^{500}\)

Similarly, while commenting on Gan Yang’s anti-traditional views around 1985, he
framed them as “young intellectuals’ anti-traditional sentiments” driven by their
aspiration for modernization.\(^{501}\) His understanding of such motifs notwithstanding,
Chen Lai stands firmly against what he sees as cultural radicalism, and perceives it as a
form of xenophilia (chongyang meiwai)\(^{502}\). In his eyes, to deny traditional culture will
consequently jeopardize a nation’s confidence and solidarity, resulting in a loss of
culture, values and spirit, which might deepen the political and economic crisis even
further.

Chen Lai’s cultural standpoint against anti-traditionalism makes him “one of the rare
mainland intellectuals” with “genuine concern with tradition and morality”.\(^{503}\) Indeed,
during the heydays of the cultural fever of 1980s, he was already confident that the
anti-traditional tendency would “gradually weaken”.\(^{504}\) And at the end of the 20\(^{th}\)
century, looking back at the movements of cultural radicalism, he concludes that “the
sense of cultural inferiority and national inferiority that has been around since May
Fourth has been proven to be totally wrong”.\(^{505}\)

Chen Lai’s concern with tradition and his belief in historical continuity have placed
him beyond the crisis consciousness and the utilitarian standards that he observes in
anti-traditionalism. He argues for the autonomy of culture, and opposes the rationale of
reducing socio-political problems into matters of culture. He guards tradition against
the accusation of its anti-modern nature, and instead perceives cultural tradition as
embodiment of a transcendent spirit that should be viewed outside the modernist

\(^{502}\) Interview with Chen Lai.
\(^{503}\) Van Dongen, Goodbye Radicalism!, p. 243.
\(^{504}\) Chen, “Sixiang chulu de san dongxiang”, p. 378.
\(^{505}\) Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 77.
framework.

Yet Chen’s criticism of anti-traditionalism during the May Fourth Movement and the 1980s is at the same time also open to critique. In his understanding, anti-traditionalism can be seen as a form of xenophilia. But, as we analyzed in the previous chapter, xenophilia is not adequate to describe the complex intellectual and emotional factors at play in the critiques of the national character. Whereas Chen Lai rightly points to the inferiority complex of anti-traditionalism, he ignores the fact that, in many cases, such inferiority is mixed with a sense of cultural superiority and a strong urge to reclaim such superiority.

Furthermore, although utilitarianism is one of the major reasons behind the pursuit of modernization and the consequent cultural radicalism, it does not mean that anti-traditionalism should be simplified as merely utilitarian. Indeed, Chen Duxiu’s iconoclasm might have been induced by the urgent need felt to strengthen the nation, even at the risk of developing towards imperialism and militarism; and Liang Qichao’s “new people” thesis was also partly founded on the assumption that if the Chinese nation is to survive the fierce competition of the Darwinist world, Chinese people have to learn from the Anglo-Saxons to be strong and vigorous.

However, Chen Lai fails to recognize another aspect of what he fights against as cultural radicalism, that is, it might also originate from a genuine belief in the “intrinsic value” of Western culture. Such a belief is seen in the texts of Hu Shi, as well as in the contemporary cultural critiques of, for example, Wang Xiaofeng. In such cases, utilitarianism might have been one of the driving forces of cultural anti-traditionalism, but certainly not the only motif that Chen employs to criticize radicalism.

3) Cultural Conservatism: A Concept Misunderstood?

Chen Lai’s argumentation about radicalism should be read in the context of the debate on radicalism (jijin zhuyi) and conservatism (baoshou zhuyi) since the 1990s. The debate has evolved around the basic opposition of anti-traditionalism (fan chuantong zhuyi) and what Chen Lai calls anti-anti-traditionalism, which places the question of Confucian thoughts and values at the center of modern Chinese intellectual history as well as contemporary Chinese culture.

506 Van Dongen, Goodbye Radicalism!, p. 205.
In resolving the tension of this opposition, as I mentioned earlier, the debates in the 1990s have resulted in a shift towards a more positive and confident perception of Confucianism. The revival of Confucianism in mainland China has been aided by overseas cultural propositions, notably those of Tu Weiming and Yu Yingshi, to combat anti-traditionalism.\footnote{Wang, High Culture Fever, p. 66.} It is also noted that the cultural viewpoints of mainland new Confucians have many similarities with those of, for example, Yu Yingshi and Lin Yusheng.\footnote{Van Dongen, Goodbye Radicalism!, p. 241.}

Therefore, the shift in perceptions of Confucianism in the 1990s is generally regarded as a conservative turn in the intellectual landscape. As Chen Lai puts it, in answering the question as to “how pre-modern Chinese culture was able to give a creative response to modernized Western culture”,\footnote{Chen, “Chapter One: Retrospect and Prospect”, p. 17.} a cultural conservatism was derived from a tenacious cultural identity rooted in a deep spiritual-cultural tradition.\footnote{Chen, “Chapter One: Retrospect and Prospect”, p. 17.} And it is abundantly clear that Chen Lai is committed to a cultural position that “wholly affirms Confucian thought and values, which is clearly a stance of anti-anti-traditionalism”.\footnote{Chen Lai, “Postface to the Revised Edition.” in idem., Tradition and Modernity, pp. 361-368: p. 361.}

Although Chen Lai states that cultural conservatism is “basically a thesis about culture that is at odds with anti-tradition thought”,\footnote{Chen Lai, “Introduction: The Humanist View.” in idem., Tradition and Modernity, pp. 1-16: p. 4.} therefore equating his anti-anti-traditionalism with cultural conservatism, he seems reluctant to be labeled as a cultural conservative: “There is no doubt that I have great sympathy and understanding for the cultural viewpoint of the so-called ‘cultural conservatives’, but this does not mean that I agree to being labeled in this way.”\footnote{Chen, “Introduction: The Humanist View”, p. 7.} This leads to the question of Chen Lai’s cultural viewpoint with regard to how he relates to the concept of cultural conservatism.

the notion of conservatism is often related to an attitude against change, many scholars have criticized such an understanding and stressed instead the “presumptions of continuity” in conservatism. In the case of Chinese conservatism, both Charlotte Furth and Schwartz have emphasized that it is essentially culture. That means, as compared to a definite cultural standpoint, conservatives in China usually take a vague or ambivalent sociopolitical position, not necessarily supporting the political status quo.

In this regard, these descriptions are in line with Chen Lai’s understanding of Chinese cultural conservatism. Chen argues that the thoughts of many so-called cultural conservatives have centered on the topic of civil morality and ethical order in modern society, and the question of the ideals of human life. Their cultural conservatism was “certainly not political conservatism, nor a clinging to the last dregs of culture without knowing anything about Western culture.”

To take the examples of cultural conservatives around the May Fourth Movement, Chen Lai contends that, though they might not have sufficiently emphasized the need to learn from Western schools of thought with regard to democracy and liberty, their thoughts cannot be construed as mere sentimental yearning for tradition. Instead, their cultural stances represented “a conviction of the universal nature of traditional morality” and its role as “a safeguard against the assaults on morality in the experience of modernization”. It should not be mistaken as a position against change. In fact, many held rather progressive, even radical political views. In the eyes of Chen Lai, Liang Shuming, for one, proved that “political democratization, military nationalization and complete absorption of Western culture” was not against his “cultural judgment” of tradition.

In Chen Lai’s interpretation, so-called cultural conservatism is not only a cultural reflection of the transformations of contemporary society; it is also a cultural appeal to the ills of contemporary industrial and commercial society:

Cultural conservatism is a positive force for the upholding of culture and values in a society of extreme commercialization. It is a restraint

Schwartz, “Notes on Conservatism”, p. 16.
Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 49.
Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 50.
on commercialism itself and on bourgeois utilitarian culture, a force of balance and criticism; and (it) points directly at the disappearance of meaning and values brought about by commercialization.\textsuperscript{521}

To demonstrate the critical attitude of cultural conservatism towards commercialization, he takes Daniel Bell (1919-2011) as an example. The thoughts of Bell, seen as “an important force for criticism from within capitalism”\textsuperscript{522} since the 1960s, according to Chen, represent “a widespread mindset of a return to tradition and a seeking for stability of values” as well as “the demands for a restoration of moral constraints and cultural order”.\textsuperscript{523} Chen Lai holds high regard to Bell’s “profound and calm cultural conservatism”: the critical revaluation of popular culture and mass movement, the reflections on liberal philosophy, the attentiveness towards belief and authority, his upholding of the continuity of civilization, and the profound religious concern in the revealing of contradictions of capitalism.\textsuperscript{524}

Furthermore, Chen Lai attaches great importance to the belief of Bell that the structure of human values may be multifarious and overlapping. As Bell described himself, he was “a socialist in economic affairs, a liberal in politics and a conservative in cultural matters, these three are all integrated into one”.\textsuperscript{525} According to Chen, Bell’s example demonstrates that cultural conservatism may become the value system of someone who holds economic socialism and political liberalism. As someone who was also “proficient in Marx”,\textsuperscript{526} Bell provides, in Chen’s opinion, a meaningful point of reference for the construction of a suitable humanist environment in China: his thoughts “support the confidence of scholars who had hesitated between the two extremes of criticism of or upholding tradition”.\textsuperscript{527}

Bearing in mind the multi-fold intellectual orientations of so-called cultural conservatives such as Liang Shuming and Daniel Bell, Chen Lai finds the terminology of cultural conservatism problematic. By stressing the aspect of being conservative, it

\textsuperscript{523} Chen, “Introduction: The Humanist View”, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{524} Chen, “Chapter Four: Radicalism”, pp. 107-108.
\textsuperscript{525} Chen, “Introduction: The Humanist View”, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{526} Chen, “Introduction: The Humanist View”, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{527} Chen, “Chapter Four: Radicalism”, pp. 107-108.
conceals the open and critical attitude of those being labeled as cultural conservatives. At the same time, it cannot describe their efforts to absorb foreign culture whilst advocating the preservation of tradition. As he puts it, “for some scholars (including myself), the idea of ‘conservatism in the area of culture’ is manifestly not a full expression of their entire view of culture”.  

If the example of Daniel Bell, as a source of inspiration to Chen Lai, demonstrates the possibilities in the concept of cultural conservatism, Chinese cultural and political realities in the past and present have shown that these possibilities have been far from realized. In the cultural realm of contemporary China, this term has many limitations—it has been too often associated with political conservatism; and it is not able to include “the critical awareness and constructive work of those scholars who are grouped under this rubric”. That is why he repeatedly stresses the possibilities of a cultural conservatism combined with various forms of economic and political viewpoints.

### 4.3. Cultural Subjectivity: China and the West

In the previous chapter I have analyzed the tendency to attribute the country’s problems to its cultural tradition and psychological make-up. In this chapter, the examination of Chen Lai’s rejection of such a tendency has presented a drastically different perception of the nation’s tradition. These different perceptions of tradition as reflected in the debate of the national character have provided us insight in Chinese dealings with the relationship between the present and the past; yet perceptions of the past or cultural tradition alone do not suffice for the quest of a cultural identity, for aside from the historical dimension, the positioning of Chinese culture has also to be understood with an international dimension, as the cultural position of the Chinese Self vis-à-vis the foreign Other.

This brings us to the issue of the relationship between Chinese and Western culture. If Chen Lai’s perception of Chinese cultural tradition is clearly demonstrated in his anti-anti-traditionalism; his understanding of the position of Chinese culture in the world is characterized by the concept of “cultural subjectivity”.

The term “subjectivity” has been a concept closely related to Western philosophy and

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theology. The works of St. Augustine (354-430) suggest that subjectivity can be thought of as “possessing an awareness of content independently of how things happen in the world, and as secure in a rich self-presence, because of its relation…to a divine reality.”\footnote{530} In his 1994 book, Frank B. Farrell talks of a “disenchantment of subjectivity”: the loss of enchanted status of the subject and “the removal from our conceptions of thinking and experiencing of the residual influence of theological and religious models”.\footnote{531} The modern philosophical concept of subjectivity deals with the relations between the mind and its understanding of the outside world.\footnote{532} It usually stresses the significance of the point of view of the subject, or the observer, as well as his or her own perceptions and perspectives.

In a more general sense, the concept of subjectivity points at, and tends to validate, the subject’s own understandings, feelings and beliefs derived from one’s own unique experiences and self-consciousness as opposed to the assumed universal objectivity. Thus, the subject is entitled an independent and autonomous status of the Self from the reality comprised of many of the Others.

In terms of Chinese culture vis-à-vis Western cultures, Chen Lai’s conception of a “cultural subjectivity” similarly requests the former’s independence and autonomy. This concept entails a sense of subjectivity at two levels: the right of a culture to be independent and different from other cultures; and the right of the people to understand their own culture based on their own experiences instead of being evaluated and judged by the standards of others.

Therefore, “cultural subjectivity” in Chen Lai’s understanding validates the particularity of Chinese culture derived from its historical and unique experiences, and at the same time stresses the self-consciousness of Chinese people in their own perceptions of the culture’s past, present and future. It argues more specifically against the tendency of “thorough Westernization”—to judge or evaluate Chinese culture

\footnote{530} Andrew Bowie, \textit{Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 9.


solely by Western standards.

1) The Particular and the Universal

Chen Lai defines cultural subjectivity as a concept that “expresses the importance of a nation’s own experiences and unique path in its development”.533 His perception of modern Chinese history differentiates the country’s political, social and cultural experiences from those of Western societies, therefore rejects any attempt to evaluate Chinese culture outside of its own social and historical contexts and solely with theories and values drawn from Western experiences. To him, the acknowledgment of the universality of certain values does not necessarily mean that such particular Western experiences should be applied for the pursuit of the same value in China. In other words, the values might be universal; the experiences can very well be particular. This approach to universality and particularity is demonstrated in his understanding of “value rationality”. To him, the acknowledgment of “value rationality” does not mean that it has to be established exclusively through the same transcendent monotheism as in the West. Chen maintains that the rationalization of Chinese culture is linked to the gradual decline (danhua) of worship of god and the increasing concern of secular culture and values.534 In the same vein, as he introduces the Weberian concept of modern “philosophical breakthrough” developed by Talcott Parson (1902-1979), he emphasizes that, while in Europe the development of thought took a transcendent breakthrough, in China, Confucianism took a different turn towards humanism.535 Therefore, while Chen employs Weber’s “value rationality” to understand the meaning of Confucianism in modern times, he nevertheless points out that Weber’s rationality framework is “not sufficient enough to grasp the particularity—the humanistic and secular aspects of Chinese cultural development”.536 In his perception, the universal “value rationality” has manifested itself in the particular developmental process of Confucianism.

However, regrettfully in his eyes, this particularity was to a large extent ignored during the 20th century, when “Westernization dominated the cultural scene, either in the form

533 Interview with Chen Lai.
534 Chen, “Rujia sixiang de genyuan”, p. 43.
535 Chen, Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie, p. 25.
536 Chen, “Rujia sixiang de genyuan”, p. 42.
of radical totalism or a specific theory”. From this perspective, cultural radicalism is resulted from a belief in universality of Western values and the ignorance of Chinese particularity. Consequently, it led to a tendency to embrace Western culture unconditionally, even in aesthetics and ethics, which Chen believes was the case for both the advocates of enlightenment and the believers of Communism. The logic of cultural radicalism was such that if Western values are to be pursued, their forms have to be followed as well. Chen criticizes such a logic as having dominated the Chinese cultural realm for a century and severely jeopardized cultural subjectivity.

Chen goes on to explain explicitly that the stress of “cultural subjectivity”—the particularity of Chinese culture and its development—is not a concept against values such as liberty or democracy. Chen Lai perceives the development of liberty and democracy in Western societies as having taken its own particular course, connecting closely to their historical and cultural experiences, political background and international conditions. During this particular process, modern Western values have been established in the development of secular humanism without the elimination of cultural-spiritual ethics of Christian religion.

Based on such a historical interpretation of the development of values such as liberty and democracy in the West, Chen begins to explore the possibility of a particular Chinese process of developing the same values. If modern universal values could be developed on basis of the Western cultural tradition, asks Chen, why couldn’t they be combined with the Chinese cultural tradition, or, Confucianism? This question, given the ample theoretical space he has argued for a Chinese cultural subjectivity, is an inquiry into the possibility of a particular Chinese course of cultural development, or a particular modern Chinese culture.

Looking at the historical experiences of the last century, Chen believes such an inquiry is not far-fetched. After all, despite the three phases of cultural radicalism he identifies, the cultural-spiritual continuity has impacted modern Chinese history, making the influence of tradition rather visible in socio-cultural development. Chen contends that Confucianism surely does not represent modern China, just as Christianity does not represent the modern West. But even if Confucianism is considered as only one part of

537 Interview with Chen Lai.  
538 Interview with Chen Lai.  
539 Interview with Chen Lai.
modern culture, “it has something that does not change”. And this stable part of Chinese culture is precisely the national spirit we discussed earlier.

Furthermore, the fact that contemporary China has risen in an economic and political sense offers a historical opportunity to realize such a possibility. To use Chen Lai’s words, “with many experiences accumulated in economic and social development”, there are new answers to the century-old question as to “how to understand and evaluate one’s own culture, at the same time re-evaluate one’s own cultural standpoint”. It is in this context that Chen Lai brings about his understanding of cultural subjectivity.

It has to be noted that Chen Lai’s proposition of a cultural subjectivity does not refute foreign influence per se, but rather implies a vision that places Chinese culture in a global context. When speaking of traditional Chinese academic culture (Zhongguo chuantong xueshu wenhua), he maintains that “National Studies” means the research conducted by Chinese researchers on their own history and culture, which naturally needs to stress the subjectivity of Chinese culture. However, to sustain (ting li) the subjectivity “does not mean to be closed off or talking to oneself, but to establish one’s own position in world culture and the international field of Chinese cultural studies”.

In this sense, cultural subjectivity, a rejection of “embracing Western culture unconditionally” and “evaluating Chinese reality with Western experiences”, is essentially a rejection of Orientalist perceptions of Chinese culture. Orientalism and Orientalist views here not only refer to Western cultural hegemony, but more importantly, in this case, point at Chinese self-orientalization—the tendency to evaluate Chinese culture and Confucianism through the lens of an Orientalist. As Dirlik points out, Orientalist conceptions no longer have distinct geographical origins, neither particularly from the West nor the East. What Chen Lai proposes in his cultural subjectivity is meant to be an antidote against such globalized Orientalism, and especially its internalization by the Chinese cultural radicals whose anti-traditionalism he stands so firmly against.

540 Interview with Chen Lai.
541 Interview with Chen Lai.
543 Interview with Chen Lai.
2) Revisiting the *Ti-Yong Concept: Chinese Learning as Substance?*

When Chen Lai argues for a cultural subjectivity, he strives to disconnect his defense of the particularity of Chinese culture from the defense of any particular political value. In his words, his cultural subjectivity “has little to do with politics”—it does not argue for “the values represented by the current political system in mainland China”. Yet it does not necessarily argue against the political status quo either. This disconnection is in line with Chen Lai’s perception of the relations between Confucianism as a humanist value and the political forms in Confucian societies. As Chen argues,

> The characteristics (of Confucian culture) might not take a decisive role in a political form, which means, they do not mechanically determine the political form of a society. Its influence on the political form is not necessarily directed towards one or the other mode...East Asian societies, for example, Korea, Japan and China, have various political forms. Some are authoritarian, some can be called democratic; and those democratic systems are also different from each other. Yet they all share a Confucian tradition...Though Confucian tradition does not independently determine modern political forms... it could still function as the main cultural value of a society. The fundamental values of societies in Korea, Taiwan, Japan and mainland China are still distinct from those of Western societies. That is to say, Confucian tradition could still influence the direction of cultural values.\(^{545}\)

As we can see from his analysis of East Asian societies, he aims to decouple the association between the authoritarian state with Confucianism that most critics of the national character point to. To avoid falling into the dichotomy of Chinese culture as authoritarian and Western culture as democratic, he argues that the Confucian tradition does not necessarily determine the form of a society towards either authoritarianism or Western-style democracy, although it is functioning as the main cultural value of Confucian societies.

On this note, it is important to examine his understanding of the formulation of *Ti-Yong*...
— “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application” (Zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong) of late Qing, which is known from the 1898 essay Exhortation to Learning (Quanxue pian) by Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), one of the representatives of the late Qing Self-Strengthening Movement. Zhang argued that both Chinese (old) and Western (new) learning should be sought; however, they should be studied under the premise that the former is essential, and the latter represents useful techniques (jiuxue wei ti, xinxue wei yong) to be used merely for its instrumental value. Liang Qichao also used the formulation while speaking of knowledge and education: Chinese learning is the essence and Western learning is the application (Zhongxue, ti ye, xixue, yong ye).546

The concept of Ti-Yong, according to Joseph Levenson, is a result of an intellectual and psychological crisis brought about by the Chinese encounter with the modern West. Levenson believed that Zhang Zhidong’s Ti-Yong concept is intellectually bankrupt as it “betrays a traditionalist’s contribution to the wearing away of tradition”.547 Yet recent studies argue that Levenson’s interpretation of Ti-Yong was too narrow.548 Re-visiting the Ti-Yong concept, many discover that it “contains many intellectual possibilities”, which enable intellectuals to avoid the charge of being disloyal to Chinese civilization in their interest in things foreign.549

Comparing it with “cultural subjectivity”, Chen Lai argues that, the term of “Chinese substance” (zhongxue wei ti) of Zhang Zhidong or the Self-Strengthening Movement pointed not only at preserving Chinese culture and ethics, but more importantly, at maintaining the imperial political system and its values. The major limits of the “Chinese substance” lie in its loyalty to the monarchy, and its attitude against Western learning beyond military and technological knowledge.550 To Chen, those are the main

546 Liang Qichao 梁启超, “Zongli yamen zou jingshi daxuetang zhangchen” 总理衙门奏京师大学堂章程, in Beijing daxue shiliao 北京大学史料 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1992), p. 82.
547 Levenson, The Problem of Intellectual Continuity, p. 69. For Levenson’s analysis of the Ti-Yong concept, see “Chapter IV: Ti and Yung—Substance and Function”, pp. 59-78.
550 Interview with Chen Lai.
differences between the *Ti-Yong* concept and his notion of cultural subjectivity, which does not relate to the values represented in mainland China’s political system.\(^5\)

His criticism notwithstanding, Chen Lai does not refuse to re-visit the *Ti-Yong* concept. He believes that the thoughts of Zhang Zhidong, as well as those of many neo-Confucian scholars, represent “a conviction of the universal nature of traditional morality” and its role as “a safeguard against the assaults on morality in the experience of modernization”.\(^5\) Although Chinese learning might be particular, its existence as a traditional value feeds into the universal quest for morality which goes beyond the modernist framework.

In fact, the “Chinese substance” was also used in the 1930s by Feng Youlan. Indicating a distinctly different understanding of “substance” from that advocated in the Self-Strengthening Movement, Feng insisted on preserving the national spirit in Chinese morality and ethics in its pursuit of modernization.\(^5\) In a sense, Chen Lai’s perception of the national spirit, or his cultural subjectivity, can be read as a development of Feng Youlan’s call for preservation of an eternal and universal morality.

The stress on Chinese culture as substance, if deprived of its political implications, could be read as another formulation of Chen Lai’s cultural subjectivity. Both imply that the national spirit, or in particular Confucian morality, is autonomous from either modernization or Western culture. Having said that, it is obvious that such a cultural conviction remains politically ambivalent. In the case of Chen Lai, he does not explicitly argue for, or against, authoritarianism, even though he repeatedly emphasizes the “critical awareness”\(^5\) or “critical attitude”\(^5\) that he believes as concealed by the label of cultural conservatism. Compared to his firm and clear cultural viewpoint, Chen Lai’s political viewpoint has not been articulated.

### 3) Cultural Subjectivity and Cultural Nationalism

While arguing for a cultural subjectivity, Chen Lai criticizes the tendency of total Westernization as a form of cultural radicalism. His criticism of xenophilia is mainly pointing at the anti-traditional aspect of such radicalism rather than the general idea of

\(^5\) Interview with Chen Lai.


\(^5\) Interview with Chen Lai.


learning from the West. To him, the problem lies not in the study of Western thought, but in the uncritical application of Western thought to the study of Chinese culture, which he believes to have led to the complete abandonment of one’s own cultural tradition.

This is also the reason why he refuses to be labeled as a cultural conservative, for the term “cultural conservatism” in his opinion does not describe his efforts to absorb foreign culture whilst advocating the preservation of tradition. Indeed, many of his theories are unfolded in his dialogues with Western philosophers and sociologists.

For example, Chen Lai recognizes the great influence of Weber’s theory of religious sociology: “the 1960s discussion of Confucian culture and modernization was basically undertaken under the umbrella of Weberian theory”. In applying Weber’s differentiation of “value rationality” and “instrumental rationality”, he admits that “through Weber we now understand better how to look at the negative side of tradition from the angle of function”. Yet at the same time he points out that Weber’s rationality framework is not sufficient to grasp the particularity of Chinese culture. Therefore, he also emphasizes that “through Gadamer we understand better how to affirm the positive aspects of traditions from humanistic values”.

Similarly, Chen Lai has incorporated the concept of “the Axial Age” of Karl Jaspers, as well as the thought of Daniel Bell in his understanding of cultural conservatism. On one occasion, Chen identified himself as a Marxist:

*The cultural topic of contemporary intellectuals should no longer be an emotional impulsive total denial of tradition but a resolution of the tension between tradition and modernity that has developed since May Fourth, a rational critique of tradition, inheriting and creatively developing it. This is not only a consensus of neo-traditionalism (modern Confucianism) and neo-liberals (such as Lin Yusheng); it should also be the attitude of us Marxists who have inherited the dialectical method of Hegel and Marx.*

Nevertheless, his attitude towards Marxism is influenced by his cultural subjectivity. In his interpretation, the fact that “Marxism was unbeknownst sinicized” is consistent

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556 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 44.
558 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 44.
559 Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 77.
with “the tendency towards subjectivity” in the development of modern Chinese culture.\(^{560}\) In the same vein, though he acknowledges the importance of the dialectical method of both Marx and Hegel, he contends that “Hegel never concealed his Eurocentric standpoint”.\(^{561}\) Consequently, when speaking of the national character reforms, he argues that its logic puts the modernization of people’s thought as the foundation of economic and political modernization, which is no other than Hegel’s outdated “historical idealism”.\(^{562}\)

Studying the cultural viewpoints and the methodologies in Chen Lai’s arguments, it seems that, while he stands grounded in the Chinese cultural tradition, he tries to keep an intellectual outlook that is open to the influence of Western thought in order to critically revaluate the very tradition he guards against. However, to sustain a balanced attitude of cultural subjectivity is a tricky business, for it has been proven that, in modern Chinese intellectual history, the relation between cultural conservatism and cultural nationalism is a rather delicate issue.

Cultural nationalism, as John Hutchinson defines it, refers to “ideological movements at times of social crisis in order to transform the belief-systems of communities and provide models for cultural and political development that guide their modernizing strategies”.\(^{563}\) Based on such a definition, Guo Yingjie, in his study of Chinese cultural nationalism, contends that the Confucian “renaissance” on the mainland is “evidently a strong current of cultural nationalism”.\(^{564}\) Whereas political nationalism can be combined with cultural iconoclasm, cultural nationalism is generally seen as the identification with the national spirit or national essence.\(^{565}\) From a different perspective, Guy Alitto has also suggested that, because modernization is often seen as a Western product, Chinese cultural conservatism as part of a global reaction against modernization naturally has its nationalistic implications.\(^{566}\)

In analyzing conservatism as an opposition to Enlightenment, Axel Schneider categorizes two types of conservatism: a “classicist conservative” believes in “a set of timeless and universal moral standards that cannot be altered and adjusted to human

\(^{560}\) Chen, “Chapter One: Retrospect and Prospect”, p. 22.
\(^{561}\) Chen, “Rujia sixiang de genyuan”, p. 33.
\(^{562}\) Chen, “Chapter Two: Resolving the Tension”, p. 70.
\(^{564}\) Guo, Cultural Nationalism, p. 72.
\(^{565}\) Guo, Cultural Nationalism, p. 17.
\(^{566}\) Alitto, The Last Confucian.
needs or desires”; and “a historicist conservative” emphasizes “particular, historically grown traditions”. He argues that, whereas the former holds the “universal ethical standards” and the latter attempts to “carefully inherit and build on the wisdom of tradition”, both types of conservatism “doubt the nationalist efforts to modernize, to build a nation-state or a new collective national identity”. In his interpretation, cultural conservatism might very well be suspicious of not only political nationalism but also cultural nationalism.

I have analyzed how Chen Lai relates to cultural conservatism. The question now is, how does Chen perceive cultural nationalism when he proposes a cultural subjectivity? In many cases, Chen chooses to transform the issue of Chinese and Western culture into one of tradition and modernity. In this light, to protect Chinese cultural tradition and morality becomes a particular form of the universal responses towards the perceived loss of humanistic spirit in the process of modernization.

In his opinion, modernization in the age of globalization has invoked the awareness of the nation as a historical subject, thereby leading to two seemingly paradoxical cultural responses: a sense of global awareness and the trend of root-seeking. And this cultural trend of root-seeking, as a part of the nostalgic sentiments towards tradition ancient and recent as well as the intellectual and popular revival of tradition, is intimately related to cultural nationalism.

In this light, cultural nationalism is not a particular Chinese phenomenon. In the global context, Chen Lai argues that a long term oppression of local cultures by Western cultural hegemony has stimulated a continuous response against it from all over the world. The relief of such oppression will understandably bring about a rising awareness of national and local cultures. Therefore, while the process of globalization has had great impact on local cultures everywhere, it has also resulted in pleas to protect cultural pluralism and concerns for cultural subjectivity. Chen Lai uses

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568  Schneider, “The One and the Many”, p. 7221.


570  Interview with Chen Lai.
Berlin’s metaphor to describe this phenomenon as “a bent twig”—an understandable and natural response towards cultural hegemony and Western universalism: “no matter what –ism you use to call it, it is a natural response in its own right”.

It is without doubt that Chen Lai attempts to propagate a sense of national confidence through his cultural subjectivity, and the national historical self-consciousness is an important part of his intellectual concern. Whereas he observes a sense of “humiliation and resentment” caused by the Western imperialist invasion and oppression since the late Qing, he especially holds a critical attitude towards xenophilia and an uncritical acceptance of Western culture that is often mixed with the sense of cultural and national humiliation. Therefore, cultural nationalism seems to have become an aid to cultural subjectivity in its guarding of tradition and its battle against xenophilia:

The interactions in the pre-modern time between China and the West have proven that ...because of the depth of its tradition and its glorious development, Chinese culture has given rise to a well-established cultural nationalism and this has determined that in the real absorption of foreign culture it requires a longer time, and that it cannot easily give up its cultural subjectivity.

Thus, it can be said that cultural nationalism to Chen Lai is a cultural standpoint against self-loathing and xenophilia by shifting the focus from modeling after the “universal” West to the re-building of the national spirit. It means to take pride in tradition as the nation’s historical legacy, and to safeguard its autonomy against Orientalist cultural views of China, whether such Orientalist views are from the West, or internalized by Chinese themselves:

The future revitalization of Asia will eradicate Euro-centrism and Western cultural hegemony. The main concern will shift from the application of Western culture to the development of its own cultural tradition. Such development in the non-Western world will demonstrate its great vitality. In China, once the West is no longer

571 Interview with Chen Lai.
572 Chen, “Lishi zijue he wenhua zhuti”.
573 Interview with Chen Lai.
574 Interview with Chen Lai.
seen as the universal model, the debate on tradition and modernity since the early 1980s will no longer be of relevance. The reconstruction of the national spirit and the system of values will be the great theme of the time.⁵⁷⁶

In conclusion, Chen Lai’s notion of cultural subjectivity stresses the importance of reading Chinese culture in a Chinese context, thereby justifying its particularity while acknowledging the universal values drawn from modern Western culture. It is a response to a perceived Western cultural hegemony, a form of rejection to an Orientalist or Eurocentric framework. His belief in the national spirit is one important answer, among many others, to the question of cultural identity—one Chinese response of the universal quest for particularity.

4.4. Concluding Remarks: Confucian Revival and Modernization

The Chinese discourse of national character as studied so far has demonstrated that contemporary Chinese self-perceptions have been formed around the central question of Confucian culture and values. In answering the question as to how Chinese culture should be placed in history and in the world, both guardians and critics of Confucianism generally describe it as the backbone and the central pillar of Chinese culture, differing mainly in their judgments as to whether it has played a positive or negative role in shaping China and its national character.⁵⁷⁷

The cultural standpoint of Chen Lai, as examined in this chapter, is undoubtedly one of a Confucian guardian. Chen rejects the discourse of national character as a part of the prevailing radical intellectual movement in the 20th century, which he strongly opposes. To him, cultural radicalism and anti-traditionalism seen in both the May Fourth Movement and in the 1980s have been driven by the instrumental urge to modernize the country. And he believes that such a cultural approach has led to xenophilia and an inferiority complex that, in the process of sabotaging tradition, have been counterproductive to the nationalistic goals of the cultural radicals, for the loss of cultural identity will eventually undermine the modern transformation of traditional cultures and societies.

In Chen Lai’s reflection of modern intellectual history, he has criticized the utilitarian

⁵⁷⁶ Chen, Gudai sixiang wenhua de shijie, p. 280.
⁵⁷⁷ Guo, Cultural Nationalism, p. 72.
tendency in anti-traditionalism. As he phrased it, during the 20th century, as the result of the spread of modernity and the influx of Western culture, Confucian thought was left “battered and bruised” and “pushed from the centre to the margins”, which was a “conscious” and “deliberate” choice of Chinese intellectuals. And such a choice, seen by Chen from the perspective of a Confucian scholar in the 21st century, has been proven totally wrong.

What he then proposes, when facing the question of Confucianism in modern China, is a cultural outlook that entails historical continuity and cultural subjectivity. He believes in a national spirit that transcends socio-political forms, which, as the nation’s cultural and historical legacy, should be preserved. And at the same time, he holds on to the view that Chinese culture is entitled to an autonomous status not only free from political ambitions for modernization but also free from modernity itself. In the age of globalization, this means that it should maintain a state of subjectivity from any hegemonic intrusion, regardless of its geographical origin.

In defending such a cultural standpoint, Chen Lai is very much aware of the fact that, in mainland China, the study of Confucian thought has been considered suspicious from two ends: from the liberal point of view, it might seem to be a feudalistic legacy against the Enlightenment mentality that is characteristically vigilant and critical towards tradition; and from the Marxist point of view, it could be considered as tending towards an ideology that challenges the guiding status of Marxism. Moreover, in the reform era, the marginalized Confucianism as Chen describes it has been pushed further in such a predicament by the recent wave of commercialism: it is now subject to criticism from radical anti-traditionalism, political misinterpretation and commercialization from the aspects of, respectively, cultural enlightenment, political democracy and economic utility.

Yet, Chen is optimistic about the future of Confucianism. As he puts it, Confucianism has gone through its severest test in over 2000 years, and it has not died. Chen argues that the strong humanistic value rationality of Confucianism has shaped the spiritual essence (jingshen qizhi) of Chinese culture, which will not be wiped out by critics:

Looking to the fate of Confucian culture in the future, there is no

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reason to lose hope or be sorrowful. On the contrary, I firmly believe that after the challenges and attacks of the last hundred years—especially the most recent decades—Confucianism has already undergone its most difficult moment. It has already stepped out of the trough.\textsuperscript{581}

It is with this belief in mind that Chen Lai wrote at the end of 20\textsuperscript{th} century: “If the twentieth century was one of ‘criticism and enlightenment’ for Chinese culture, the twenty-first century will be one of ‘creation and revitalization’, and the turn of the century is precisely a turning point for the life of the whole nation (zhénxià qìyuàn).”\textsuperscript{582}

And this optimistic vision for the development of Confucianism is supported from another perspective by a comparison with modern Western culture:

\textit{Looking at the many problems of post-industrial society in the West, such as extreme individualism, worship of money and the distancing in human relationships which this brings, the loneliness and fears of the individual, it might be thought that once China has realized modernization, the time for a new development of the Confucian tradition will have come. At that time, anti-traditionalism on the surface will have disappeared, and what will replace it is necessarily a cultural renaissance rooted in a deep national tradition. In this sense, the chief condition for revival of traditional thought is modernization.}\textsuperscript{583}

As such, Chen establishes his argument that Confucianism is not the obstacle of modernization; on the contrary, the realization of modernization would serve as the foundation for the revival of Confucianism. This conclusion is based on Chen’s understanding of modernization, which is signified by economic development. As Chen argues, “China in the first decade of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century has entered modernization, though in its primary stage”.\textsuperscript{584} Now that China no longer lags behind the West in an economic sense as much as around the May Fourth Movement or in the 1980s, the context for the development of Confucianism is quite different.

In this way, Chen suggests that modernization has been achieved; the chief condition

\textsuperscript{581} Chen, “Postface”, pp. 362-363.
\textsuperscript{582} Chen, “Chapter Fifteen: National Studies Research”, p. 347.
\textsuperscript{583} Chen, “Chapter One: Retrospect and Prospect”, p. 31.
\textsuperscript{584} Interview with Chen Lai.
for the revival of traditional thought has been satisfied. If the previous cultural movements were prompted by a sense of frustration in the troubled path towards modernization, the contemporary cultural realm is dominated by a different state of mind. Consequently, in Chen’s opinion, the state of economic modernization will lead to a revaluation of national history and culture. In terms of the relations between Chinese and Western cultures, radicalism will not be predominant as was the case during the May Fourth and the 1980s. The prevailing sentiment will no longer be self-negation or self-loathing, but a strong sense of cultural pride.

However, the question as to whether China has entered modernization remains open to debate. In the previous chapters, the examination of the discourse of national character has demonstrated that anti-traditionalism has not disappeared from the contemporary cultural scene, and cultural critiques still aim at Confucianism, not just accusing its incapability to aid economic modernization, but also questioning its values in comparison with democracy, individual liberty, equality, and so on. In the eyes of these cultural critics, modernization is far from achieved. Wang Xiaofeng, for one, contends that the mindset of Chinese people is still trapped in the imperial worldview.

Furthermore, putting aside the question of Chinese modernization, Chen Lai’s defense of Confucianism at different frontiers has its own limitations. He holds to the idea that the national spirit, manifested in Confucian humanistic philosophy, will not only survive, but revitalize in the 21st century as an ethic-spiritual value that challenges Western cultural hegemony. However, considering the importance he attaches to cultural continuity and the value of tradition in modern societies, his reduction of Confucianism to a mere moral guidance makes his argument less convincing. While he rightfully disconnects the concept of cultural subjectivity with political conservatism, he nonetheless does not touch upon the inevitable influence of political system, thought and value on the development of culture. In order to argue for the autonomy of Confucianism, Chen has to limit Confucian thought as somewhat quarantined from the political status quo and its prominent political values without recognizing either its impact on political thoughts or the possibility of it being exploited by the existing political and institutional structure.

It seems to suggest that, in defending Confucianism, Chen Lai is forced to stand clear of its political implications and emphasize the separation of scholarship, culture and

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585 Interview with Chen Lai.
politics. To the Confucian scholar and a guardian of cultural values, “any engagement in politics was to be avoided, because it would endanger the autonomy of the cultural and value spheres”.\(^{586}\) It is also on such a ground that he rejects cultural radicalism for its political agenda as well as for its reduction of political and social problems into cultural critiques. Yet to what extent can such realms be separated is another question. The Confucian revival has been closely watched exactly because of its political implications. As Jing Wang puts it, whether Confucians admit it or not, “tradition is by no means immune to the regimen of instrumental reason whenever it plays into the hands of political authorities”\(^{587}\).

Even Chen Lai himself admits that, although intellectuals do not necessarily have to support the political status quo, it is also not necessary to keep an intentional distance from the political structure.\(^{588}\) When he speaks of the spirit of public intellectuals, he notes that “the responsibility of bearing the burden of the empire or the nation has exercised a palpable spiritual influence on the work of modern Chinese intellectuals”, which makes it very difficult for them to “neglect their concern for public matters or to regard the embodiment of this spirit as confined solely to intellectuals within the academic world”.\(^{589}\) As Chen observes from ancient scholar-officials as well as contemporary intellectuals, their intellectual concerns are connected with political concern, social participation and cultural emphasis—all originating from a sense of moral obligation towards Tianxia.

Therefore, it is abundantly clear that the political implications of Confucianism cannot be ignored, and, that Confucianists are not free from political ambitions. The tension between culture and politics has in this case manifested itself within the Confucian scholar: on the one hand, in order to defend Confucian thought and values from various political and cultural misinterpretations, Chen tries to extract Confucianism from its socio-political context and define it as a religio-ethical philosophy with a humanistic orientation; on the other hand, as he remains committed to the Confucian intellectual tradition that places himself and his fellow Confucianists as practitioners and exemplars, he is not able to escape his sense of moral obligation towards the society.

\(^{586}\) Van Dongen, *Goodbye Radicalism!* , p. 213.
\(^{587}\) Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 70.
\(^{589}\) Chen, “Rujia sixiang chuantong”, p. 17.
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