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Chapter 5. Qin Hui: A Proposal of Western-Confucian Convergence

The stress of historical continuity and cultural subjectivity as analyzed in the previous chapter is a cultural stance that forms a stark contrast with the mode of thinking of critics of the national character. In the intellectual trend against anti-Confucianism and anti-traditionalism since the 1990s, if Chen Lai's rejection of the discourse of national character is representative of self-perceptions of the New-Confucian school, there are many other schools that demonstrate different intellectual and cultural orientations. That is to say, although they also defend Confucianism and disconnect it with social and cultural problems, they do so from different perspectives.

This indicates one significant feature of the most recent intellectual return to tradition: the so-called cultural conservatives, including the New-Confucians, are joined by schools of thought across a wide spectrum—ranging from Marxism to post-modernism to the New-Left—in their positive perceptions of Confucian culture and values.

Among them, the defense of Confucianism by some liberal intellectuals offers an interesting case to this study because, despite a shared socio-political belief in free market, democracy, human rights, and rule of law, these liberal intellectuals represent a cultural standpoint that is at odds with that of cultural critics who are usually also labeled as liberals.

This chapter will analyze the perceptions of historian Qin Hui (b. 1953), who, identified as a “firm advocate of liberal principles”⁵⁹⁰, rejects the criticism of national character and envisions a positive role of Confucianism in the future of Chinese culture. By studying his opinion of the discourse of national character, I will examine how his defense of Confucianism and his vision of Chinese culture differ from those of Chen Lai's.

Before we look into Qin Hui's cultural viewpoints, it is necessary to briefly outline his academic background and intellectual concerns in order to better understand his opinions. Qin studied history at Lanzhou University (M.A., 1981) after spending nine years (1969-78) in a remote village of Guangxi Province during the Cultural Revolution. He has been teaching at Shaanxi Normal University and Qinghua

⁵⁹⁰ Davies, *Worrying About China*, p. 60.

University where he currently works as Professor of History.

Qin's early research interests were in the field of agrarian history, and what he calls "the peasant question" is the point of departure for many different issues he became concerned with since the 1990s. Qin regards "the peasant question" as "essentially a problem of China's modernization",⁵⁹¹ and, vice versa, the central question in his concern with regard to China's modernization is a question as to "where should a peasant China go?"⁵⁹²

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, it is also from the perspective of the peasant mentality that Qin Hui approaches the question of national character. He combines historical studies with research on the peasant society, and, to borrow Wang Chaohua's description, as "a staunch foe of peasant exploitation",⁵⁹³ he has published extensively on issues related to social justice, political democracy, free market, and rule of law, and outspokenly criticized the lack of freedom and order in the marketization.⁵⁹⁴ It is for this reason that he is seen as one of China's most prominent advocates of liberalism.

At the same time, his political-economic liberalism is combined with the ideology of "social democracy",⁵⁹⁵ in which he argues that the power of the state should be balanced with its responsibility to provide social welfare. He perceives social justice and equality as the paramount issues in social development, and vigorously criticizes the phenomenon of "enriching the state and weakening the people" (*guojin mintui*). Such a phenomenon, in his opinion, is closely related to the unregulated market in which the privileged groups seek power and resources from the underprivileged, especially the large peasant population.

In his own words, Qin Hui stands "to critique both oligarchy from a liberal standpoint and populism from a social democratic standpoint".⁵⁹⁶ This position, according to

⁵⁹¹ Qin Hui, "Dividing the Big Family Assets: on Liberty and Justice," in Wang Chaohua (ed.), *One China, Many Paths*, pp. 128-159: 139.

⁵⁹² Qin, "Dividing the Big Family Assets", p. 140.

⁵⁹³ Wang Chaohua, "Introduction: Minds of the Nineties", p. 24.

⁵⁹⁴ For example, see Qin Hui 秦晖, *Wenti yu zhuyi: Qin Hui wenxuan* 问题与主义: 秦晖文选 (Changchun: Changchun chubanshe, 1999). Qin Hui 秦晖, *Shijian ziyou* 实践自由 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2004). Qin Hui 秦晖, *Biange zhi dao* 变革之道 (Zhenzhou: Zhenzhou daxue chubanshe, 2007).

⁵⁹⁵ See Qin Hui, translated by David Kelly, "The Common Baseline of Modern Thought," *The Mystery of the Chinese Economy*, special issue of *The Chinese Economy*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2005), pp. 12-22: 19.

⁵⁹⁶ Qin, "The Common Baseline", p. 19.

Gloria Davies, represents a “third way” that “straddles both the ‘new left’ emphasis on collective wellbeing and the ‘liberal’ emphasis on individual and property rights”.⁵⁹⁷ As Qin Hui contends, the only solution to China’s many problems is to pursue more freedom and more equality at the same time.⁵⁹⁸ And such an approach is described by Qin himself as reaching towards a “common baseline” (*gongtong de dixian*) of a modern society:

*Against the background of China’s present “issues”, what I support are the values upheld by both liberalism and social democracy, and what I oppose are the values that both of these oppose....Is my position that of the “Third Path”? Perhaps so, but it would be more accurate to call it a “superimposition” of the first and second paths (and not a path intermediate between them or beyond them). In any event, given that China’s problem at present is not one of “freedom at the expense of equality” or vice versa, we should only have a Third Path that pursues more freedom and also more equality.*⁵⁹⁹

Qin Hui’s outspoken political ideology seems to place him on the same side as many of the politically liberal, culturally critical intellectuals. Indeed, the critics of the national character analyzed in Chapter Three do hold a liberal political view similar to that of Qin’s. However, in the cultural sphere, Qin Hui’s liberalism and social democracy is combined with his commitment to what he regards as a lingering legacy of Confucian spirit.

⁵⁹⁷ Gloria Davies, “China’s Reformists: From Liberalism to the ‘Third Way’”, *Global Dialogue*, Volume 9, Number 1-2 (2007): The Rise of China. Text available at: <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=398>

⁵⁹⁸ See Qin Hui’s articles: Bian Wu 卞悟, “Gongzheng zhishang lun”公正至上论, in *Dong Fang* 东方 *Orient*, No. 6 (1994), pp. 4-9. Bian Wu 卞悟, “Zai lun gongzheng zhishang—qidian pingdeng ruhe keneng”再论公正至上——起点平等如何可能 in *Dong Fang*, No. 2 (1995), pp. 18-23. Bian Wu 卞悟, “Gongzheng, jiazhi lixing yu fanfuban—san lun gongzheng zhishang”公正、价值理性与反腐败——三论公正至上 in *Dong Fang*, No. 6 (1995), pp. 4-7. Qin Hui 秦晖, “Shehui gongzheng yu Zhongguo gaige de jingyan yu jiaoxun”社会公正与中国改革的经验与教训 in *Gaige* 改革 *Reform*, No. 5 (1998). Qin Hui 秦晖, “Yu pingdeng yu ziyou zhizhong”寓平等于自由之中 in *Zhongguo shuping* 中国书评 No. 2 (1998). Qin Hui 秦晖, *Tianping ji* 天平集 (Beijing: xinhua chubanshe, 1997). Qin Hui 秦晖, “Zhongguo gaige: lishi yu jingji de pingjia”中国改革: 历史与经济的评价, in *Zhanlue yu guanli* 战略与管理 No. 2 (2000).

⁵⁹⁹ Qin, “The Common Baseline”, pp. 19-20.

To further study Qin's perceptions of Chinese culture, the following questions will be asked: how does he perceive the critiques of national character? On what theoretical and empirical grounds does he reject the causal link between China's many issues and the national character, or, Confucianism? On top of that, what are his perceptions of Confucianism in a cultural China and its future in the world? Research materials for this chapter include Qin's monographs and academic articles related to Chinese culture since the 1990s, as well as a personal interview with Qin Hui in Beijing on February 23, 2011.

5.1. National Character and Culture

One important characteristic of Qin Hui's view on the discourse of national character is that, although he is well informed of its connection with Western perceptions of China, he chooses to deal with these two issues separately. His critiques of the discourse of national character are based on his analysis of Chinese debates on the matter, and do not relate to how it has been influenced by Western discourses.

In fact, he quotes the study of M. G. Mason⁶⁰⁰ and categorizes two types of perceptions that run parallel to each other in the history of Chinese images in the West: "the missionary perspective" that demonstrates intellectual interests in Chinese religion and philosophy through the study of the classics; and "the merchant perspective" that is more concerned with the folk customs that appear on "the surface layer" of the society.

⁶⁰¹

While Qin observes the influence of both perspectives in contemporary Western perceptions of China, he proposes to accept foreign images as nothing more, or less, than what they are—perceptions originating from a foreign perspective:

*We should be realistic and accept that Western perceptions are based on their own issues, so there is no need to feel self-loathing or to be arrogant about our own image in the West, either in the past or present.*⁶⁰²

Qin Hui draws attention to the fact that the foreigner, in his or her observations of

⁶⁰⁰ Mason, *Western Concepts of China*.

⁶⁰¹ Qin Hui, "Transition in a Hundred Years: Perceptions of China from 'Merchants' and 'Missionaries'," in idem., *Wenti yu zhuyi*, p. 5.

⁶⁰² Qin, "Transition in a Hundred Years", p. 6.

China, naturally takes a different standpoint from that of a Chinese. And vice versa, Chinese perceptions of the West are also based on observations from a Chinese perspective. That is to say, when one evaluates foreign observations, the consciousness of the observer should be taken into account as something natural and inherent. Such a standpoint is significantly different from those analyzed so far: he does not propose to “use foreigners’ lenses” to reflect on Chinese culture, as many cultural critics do; nor does he reject foreign perceptions on the ground that they are a manifestation of Orientalism or Eurocentrism.

As he elaborates in a book review⁶⁰³, some of the Western perceptions being criticized as Orientalist views are in fact due to “deliberate” national or racial discrimination⁶⁰⁴, which in Qin’s understanding should be seen as a problem of morality or conflicting interest rather than an intellectual issue. And in other cases, if the mistakes in foreign observation are due to limited information or knowledge, they fall into the category of academic imprecision and should not be criticized because of the identity of the observer. In a third scenario, when a Western commentator employs certain Chinese or Oriental issues for the purpose of pointing at Western problems, whether in a positive or negative light, there is no need to escalate such a strategy into a generalized Orientalism.⁶⁰⁵

With regard to critiques of Orientalism, Qin Hui acknowledges that, in the West, they do represent valuable historical introspections, and, outside the West, the wakening of non-Western self-consciousness. Yet he warns against the tendency to conceal the real problem with the somewhat generalized critique of Orientalism.

In his opinion, Western reflections of Orientalism result from the contest of various schools of thought, centering on issues of Western society, rather than taking a new perspective in viewing the “Orient”. And in terms of issues emerging in Chinese society, one should not be distracted by the rise and fall of the Orientalism in the West; instead, one should shift the focus from the East-West opposition to the real issue at hand, regardless of the geographic location of the observer.

⁶⁰³ This is a review of the book by Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley [etc.]: University of California Press, 1998). See Qin Hui 秦晖, “Shei, mianxiang nage dongfang” 谁, 面向哪个东方? in idem., *Chuantong shi lun* 传统十论 (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2004).

⁶⁰⁴ Qin, “Shei, mianxiang nage dongfang”, p. 289.

⁶⁰⁵ Qin, “Shei, mianxiang nage dongfang”, pp. 289-290.

How far Qin Hui's conception of Orientalism deviates from Edward Said's original concept is of course open to question, yet here the point of clarifying Qin's understanding of Western perceptions of China is that, when it comes to Chinese discourse of national character, Qin does not connect it with Orientalism. Or, to put it slightly differently, according to Qin, Chinese critiques of the national character are problematic, not because they represent a sort of internalized Orientalism, but because of the flaws in their inner logic—what he describes as a type of cultural determinism.

1) Critiques of the National Character as Cultural Determinism

Cultural determinism, Qin contends, assumes a causal link between the problems in society with the often deeply embedded, almost genetically determined, cultural tradition. He argues that this assumption is made out of an urge “to satisfy people's psychological needs”—the internal impulse to interpret issues in social reality and to change reality in a way that is in line with one's value judgment.⁶⁰⁶ It is based on such an understanding that Qin evaluates the national character critique, both around the May Fourth era and in the reform period.

The most notable example that Qin takes to demonstrate the cause of cultural determinism is Liang Qichao's “new people” thesis, which Qin believes was formed out of Liang's urge to interpret the failure of the 1898 reform movement:

*After the failure of the Hundred Day Reforms, some people attributed the failure of the movement to the “quality” (suzhi) of the Chinese nation. And that was how the “new people thesis” [of Liang Qichao] and the question of the national character came into being.*⁶⁰⁷

Liang Qichao launched a movement of critique against Chinese cultural characteristics or the national character... He did not look for the reason for the reform movement's failure from the ruling group's conservative nature or its internal conflicts, or from the reform movement's own defects or strategic mistakes, instead he was strongly enticed by a theory that incriminates the nature of the nation and its

⁶⁰⁶ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Wenhua jue ding lun de pinkun—chaoyue wenhua xingtai shiguan” 文化决定论的贫困——超越文化形态史观 in idem., *Wenti yu zhuyi*, p. 307.

⁶⁰⁷ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Zai jixu qimeng zhong fansi qimeng” 在继续启蒙中反思启蒙, in idem., *Biange zhi dao*, p. 209.

“evil roots”.⁶⁰⁸

Similarly, in the eyes of Qin Hui, Chen Duxiu followed the reformist Liang after the revolution failed, and turned into “a believer of the theory of national character”.⁶⁰⁹ If Liang and Chen could not refuse the “enticement” to theorize the past as a way to avoid facing the real cause of the failure, either consciously or unconsciously, then, for other advocates of the national character reforms like Lu Xun, Qin argues, to negate the nation’s culture serves as a pragmatic strategy to change social reality:

*Take the most vigorous critic of “national defects”, Lu Xun, as an example, he promoted “out of China, and into the West” in order to get “out of the medieval, and into the modern”. In order to negate the medieval Chinese culture, he had to take the posture of total negation of Chinese culture.*⁶¹⁰

According to Qin, a similar phenomenon is to be found in cultural critiques in the reform era, especially in the 1980s. Qin criticizes the tendency to incriminate the national character during the cultural fever, and calls it a phenomenon of “*Jing Ke ci Kongzi*”—the assassin Jing Ke, in his mission to kill the tyrant Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, ended up stabbing the scapegoat Confucius.⁶¹¹

Whereas Qin Hui recognizes the benign intention of such critiques, he is rather skeptical about the pursuit of social change through cultural interpretation. As he maintains, he is not “optimistic about Enlightenment through national character criticism”,⁶¹² and he even believes that such criticism might have “counterproductive consequences”.⁶¹³

Qin’s skepticism is not only caused by the idea that critiques of the national character are produced out of an urge to “satisfy the psychological needs”, or as a pragmatic strategy to develop Chinese culture from “medieval” to “modern”; more importantly, it is caused by his refutation of a deterministic view of history. To put it simply, Qin

⁶⁰⁸ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Xi ru huirong, jiegou fa dao hubu” 西儒会融, 解构法道互补, in idem., *Chuantong shi lun*, p. 232.

⁶⁰⁹ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 232.

⁶¹⁰ Qin, “Wenhua jue ding lun”, p. 323.

⁶¹¹ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Kegui de fengmang—xu yujie *Shanguang shi*,” 可贵的锋芒——序余杰〈闪光石〉 in idem., *Shijian ziyou*, p. 174.

⁶¹² Qin, “Kegui de fengmang”, p. 174.

⁶¹³ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 232.

believes that Chinese culture is not responsible for failures in political movements because “the cause of the cause of a cause is no cause”.⁶¹⁴ It is in this sense that Qin finds the logic of cultural determinism flawed, for one cannot interpret history with the single parameter of national character, whether it entails national defects or national merits.

2) The Incomparable National Character

The inner logic of cultural determinism that establishes a link between social problems and national character has a theoretical assumption that Qin Hui finds problematic. That is, the cultural deterministic concept of “culture” has a strong racial connotation, which usually confuses the concept “culture” with “nation” or “the national character”.

According to Qin Hui, the meaning of “national character” as employed by cultural critics is close to Ruth Benedict’s definition as a way of thinking and a behavioral pattern that is manifested in the nation’s activities and that distinguishes the nation from others.⁶¹⁵ Such a conception is comprised of two key elements—a distinctive national character and its consistency and transcendence.

Qin does not object to such a terminology, or definition of national character. However, he believes that such a national character, with its innate racial connotations, is very different from what the critics call “culture”. It is on this ground that he criticizes the discourse of “culture” in the 1980s as well as in contemporary China:

*People nowadays are used to define a culture with a nation, and define a nation with its culture: culture is the characteristic of a nation, and the nation is the carrier of a culture. In such a discourse, culture is actually the synonym of “the national character”...Yet what eventually constitutes “the national character” remains unclear..... The culture that distinguishes one nation from the other also includes the idea that it is consistent, or it does not make the nation of today different from that of yesterday. Therefore “culture” emphasizes the parts of the national character that transcend time.*⁶¹⁶

...culture has become “the characteristics of a nation that is different

⁶¹⁴ Qin, “The Common Baseline”, p. 15.

⁶¹⁵ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: New American Library, 1946).

⁶¹⁶ Qin, “Wenhua jue ding lun”, p. 290.

from other nations”...it points to both behavior patterns and ways of thinking...to put it bluntly, in this sense, culture is the national character...⁶¹⁷

The racial perspective in the understanding of culture is very misleading in Qin Hui’s eyes, for a “horizontal comparison of national character” creates an irreconcilable binary in perceptions of nations:

Cultural determinism often presumes two types of nations: one of an active nature, of competition and independence; the other of a nature of community, in favor of a protected and harmonious life...⁶¹⁸

Critics of the national character often opt to criticize Chinese culture by comparing it with Western culture. Such a comparison, Qin notes, usually concludes in binary conceptions such as the conservative Chinese and progressive Westerner, the collective Chinese and the individualistic Westerner, Chinese morality as opposed to Western instrumentality.⁶¹⁹ The binaries are sometimes expressed metaphorically, for example, as the differences between the yellow earth and the blue ocean in the documentary series *River Elegy*.

Because Qin Hui regards national character as transcendent, something almost inherent in the people of a certain nation, he believes that it is not to be reformed or changed. As he puts it, after all, “the yellow civilization won’t change into blue civilization”.⁶²⁰ Moreover, to him, it is also a result of different national and racial aesthetic preferences, which are not to be compared, if freedom of choices is ensured. Of course, this kind of incomparable racial-cultural preferences should not be subject to value judgment.

This implies that, if there is no freedom of choice and people’s ways of thinking and behavioral patterns are limited by institutional constraints, the problem becomes one of the social system rather than the national character. In this case, Qin argues, differences

⁶¹⁷ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Wenhua bijiao yu ziji dui ziji fuze de lishiguan” 文化比较与自己对自己负责的历史观 in idem., *Biange zhi dao*, pp. 76-77.

⁶¹⁸ Qin, “Wenhua jue ding lun”, p. 287.

⁶¹⁹ Qin Hui 秦晖 and Su Wen 苏文, *Tianyuan shi yu kuangxiangqu: Guanzhong moshi yu qianjindai shehui de zai renshi* 田园诗与狂想曲: 关中模式与前近代社会的再认识, with an original English title: *Pastorals and Rhapsodies: A Research of Peasant Societies and Peasant Culture* (Beijing: zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 1996).

⁶²⁰ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 231.

among societies can be compared and value judgments are to be applied.⁶²¹

As such, Qin Hui questions the concept of “culture” as the underlying assumption of cultural critics in that it confuses the incomparable racial (national)-cultural distinctions with the comparable social-cultural phenomena observed in different societies. When “culture” is mistaken as “nation”, many of the incomparable national traditions and cultural symbols will be subject to undue value judgment, the evaluation of social-cultural phenomena will be misled towards “the value judgment of a nation”,⁶²² hence prone to a racial evaluation to reckon the better or worse of the nature of a race.

Therefore, he proposes to make a very clear distinction between national culture, including national character, and social systems (*zhidu*). In his understanding, if one speaks of “culture” as a general term, only by singling out “the institutional” and “the social”, can a certain “culture” be compared with another. Otherwise, “culture” in the sense of “the national” and “the racial”, for example, the national character, is not comparable.

3) Culture as a Social and Historical Phenomenon

While cultural determinism attributes ills in a society to culture, civilization, and the nature of the nation, Qin argues that one should replace the racial approach with a social perspective. As he puts it, “culture” is essentially a “historical and social phenomenon” rather than “an index of national character”⁶²³ such as perceived in the generic comparisons between China and the West during the cultural fever.

To put it in another way, he believes that the “Chinese culture” under criticism is essentially of a social nature instead of a racial nature.⁶²⁴ The so-called “national characteristics” consist of social behaviour—a manifestation of a “social culture” rather than of a “racial culture”.⁶²⁵ By separating national culture from social systems, Qin stresses the social aspects of the problem of “culture” and argues that the attention

⁶²¹ Qin, “Wenhua bijiao”, p. 93.

⁶²² Qin Hui 秦晖, “Disan bumen, wenhua chuantong yu Zhongguo gaige” 第三部门、文化传统与中国改革 in idem., *Biange zhi dao*, p. 52.

⁶²³ Qin, “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, p. 138.

⁶²⁴ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 224.

⁶²⁵ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 230.

on national distinctions should be diverted to social institutions and systems.⁶²⁶

Therefore, based on his study of Chinese rural society and peasant history, he takes an alternative perspective to the discourse of national character in his examination of the so-called cultural problems. Instead of focusing on the shortcomings in Confucianism, Qin's analysis of social culture begins with his study of peasant culture. As he believes, China is "originally an agrarian country" and the so-called "national character" is basically "the character of the peasants".⁶²⁷

As noted earlier, many of the stereotypical peasant images, such as the image of Ah Q created by Lu Xun, are interpreted as reflecting the defects in national character. Qin Hui's analysis treats the peasant personality as a type of community-dependent social behaviour, resulting from the patriarchal social order in rural China. Peasants confined to a patriarchal community such as in rural China, do demonstrate a mode of thinking that is not rational, according to Qin, and Ah Q can be seen as an example of such irrational thinking.⁶²⁸

However, Qin argues that the lack of rationality is not a specific characteristic of the Chinese nation, but more related to the patriarchal natural economy and the consequent ill-development of the individual personality that are also seen in other patriarchal communities.⁶²⁹ In fact, Qin believes that the servility as criticized in the discourse of national character is also the result of the same social constraints.⁶³⁰ Following this interpretation, Chinese peasant culture becomes as a logical consequence of the patriarchal society; and once the patriarchal system changes, the features of peasant culture will follow and change too:

*The community that has bred the culture could be interpreted rationally—it came into being logically, and it will disappear logically as well.*⁶³¹

With his distinction of social culture from racial-national culture, Qin Hui takes a fundamentally different perspective in viewing China's "national defects" as called by many cultural critics. In his opinion, these socially-determined cultural traits will

⁶²⁶ Qin, "Disan bumen", p. 50.

⁶²⁷ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 238.

⁶²⁸ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, pp. 323-324.

⁶²⁹ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, pp. 310, 314 & 321.

⁶³⁰ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 326.

⁶³¹ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 230.

evolve together with the development of social institutions:

*To state that the “cultural defects” have determined the servile social status of Chinese people is unreasonable. Many Confucian and Daoist ideas accompanying the patriarchal society are able to transmute along with the institutional changes brought about by globalization.*⁶³²

If the national characteristics are social features, but not genetically linked with a race or a nation, the solution to ills in society will be social reforms—to reform an agrarian society into a modern society—rather than reforms of the people. In his view, if the patriarchal community in rural China is dissolved, the peasant will be freed from his social contract and eventually also be free from the way of thinking that has been constrained in the patriarchal community. Then, like turning pastorals to rhapsodies, the peasants can transform themselves into farmers, acquiring “the freedoms of a modern citizen”⁶³³ as well as the liberal personality that their ancestors were not able to develop.⁶³⁴

Departing from such a social viewpoint, Qin Hui’s research has been centered on the question of how to transform “peasant states, agricultural civilizations, and traditional societies” into “citizen states, industrial civilizations, and modern societies”.⁶³⁵ And it is exactly in this sense that he contends that “the peasant question is essentially a problem of China’s modernization”⁶³⁶

Qin’s interpretation of culture as a logical consequence of socio-political institutions leads to an understanding of “the national character” that is very similar to Chen Lai’s “*guomin xing*”. The cultural characteristics are temporary, formed within the context of a certain socio-political environment, and once the social structure changes, many of the so-called national characteristics will no longer exist.

While Chen Lai separates the eternal national spirit (*minzu xing*) from the temporal cultural features (*guomin xing*), Qin Hui makes a distinction between the definition of the unchangeable (racial) nation and changeable (social) culture. This distinction leaves him much room to defend the preservation of traditional culture, more

⁶³² Qin Hui 秦晖, “Zhidu pengzhuang yu wenhua jiaorong,” 制度碰撞与文化交融 in *idem.*, *Biange zhi dao*, p. 99.

⁶³³ Qin, “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, pp. 150-151.

⁶³⁴ Qin and Su, *Pastorals and Rhapsodies*, p. 377.

⁶³⁵ Qin, “The Common Baseline”, p. 13.

⁶³⁶ Qin, “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, p. 139.

specifically, Confucianism, and at the same time to call for social and political changes.

4) The Trap of Cultural Determinism

Qin perceives the danger of cultural determinism in its tendency to confuse social culture with national culture, or culture with nation, which will then lead to a very pessimistic and deterministic view of the future. When “nation” becomes “culture”, many of the cultural problems caused by social institutions will be seen as unchangeable national and racial characteristics; and if combined with cultural relativism, it will eventually result in a negation of progress. To look at it the other way around, if “culture” becomes “nation”, evaluation of social systems might be leading towards the wrong direction and turning to value judgment of aesthetic and even racial differences in the cultural realm:

*One cannot compare cultures but one can compare systems... we need to stand against two points of views: the first one is to obstruct institutional progress in the name of preserving culture; the second one is to enforce cultural assimilation in the name of improving the system/institution. I think both are equally unreasonable.*⁶³⁷

Yet, it is important to note that Qin Hui's rejection of cultural determinism is not limited to his skeptical attitude towards the national character criticism; it also points to the opponents of the national character critique. When analyzing the cultural movements around the May Fourth, he wrote:

*It was just as if a consensus of “cultural determinism” has been reached through “the antithesis of Chinese and Western national characters”, as well as “the antithesis of Western and Confucian theories”... The “cultural conservatism” that was pro-Confucianism and anti-Westernization after the May Fourth Movement was just another type of expression of such a consensus... The result was that while cultural critique and cultural conservatism were consciously opposing each other, they were objectively confirming each other.*⁶³⁸

Similarly, Qin argues that, during the reform era, cultural determinism is to be found

⁶³⁷ Qin, “Wenhua bijiao”, p. 87.

⁶³⁸ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 231.

not only in the criticism of the “national defects” before 1989, but also in the promotion of a “national root of excellence” after 1989. Both share a determinist view of history.⁶³⁹ In his article *The Poverty of Cultural Determinism*, he explicitly pointed out that “both new-Confucianism and anti-traditionalism are colored by cultural determinism”.⁶⁴⁰

In order not to fall into the trap of cultural determinism, Qin Hui proposes a historiography “of being responsible to ourselves” instead of holding the national character or cultural tradition responsible. As he wrote, “If tomorrow China does not do well, we shall not blame Confucius or Marx for it—only ourselves”.⁶⁴¹ To him, it is vital to focus on the real social issues by disconnecting them from the national character or national culture.

5.2. Confucianism: The Wrong Target

When Qin Hui opposes what he calls “cultural determinism”, he points out its theoretical flaw in that it confuses the transcendent, incomparable national character with culture as the historical result of different, comparable social systems. Yet it is not the only flaw that Qin finds in the critiques of national character. In his opinion, when cultural determinism is applied to analyze Chinese culture and society, it assumes a view of history that takes Confucianism as the sole representative of Chinese tradition. Consequently, critics usually place Confucianism at the center of criticism.

However, to Qin, Confucianism is the unfortunate wrong target of cultural reforms. As he puts it, “Confucianism is not the main obstacle to China’s progress, though not some trump of salvation that transcends modernity either”.⁶⁴² His own account of the socio-cultural structure of traditional China provides a different perspective than most cultural studies on traditional Chinese society do. He describes the Chinese cultural tradition as constituted not by a dominant Confucianism; instead, he perceives it as having formed out of a constant tension between Confucianism (*rujia*) and Legalism (*fajia*).

⁶³⁹ Qin, “Wenhua jue ding lun”, p. 291.

⁶⁴⁰ Qin, “Wenhua jue ding lun”, p. 324.

⁶⁴¹ Qin, “The Common Baseline”, p. 22.

⁶⁴² Qin, “Zhidu peng zhuang”, p. 100.

1) Confucianism, Legalism and Daoism

In Qin's narrative, it is the combination of Confucianism and Legalism that has been applied as the ruling ideology. These two, together with Daoism (*daojia*) as the third element, have formed a complementary ternary socio-cultural structure. In imperial China, although Confucianism had always been the formally dominant ideology, the essential ideologies at play were, respectively, Legalism for the ruling class, and Daoism for the people being ruled.

In his study of the official administration (*li zhi*) through the imperial history, Qin discovers two confronting philosophies—Confucian moral principle and Legalist power philosophy:

*Although people often take Confucianism as the synonym of Chinese culture, the Chinese society, ruled by a political system of Qin Dynasty style, is precisely extremely anti-Confucian from its theory to its implementation. The ruling ideologies are almost two extremes—Confucian ideas of administration are based upon the human nature of virtue, centered on the principle of ethics, and with administrative justice taking precedence; while legalist ideas of administration are based upon the belief in the evil nature of people, centered on the principle of power, and with administrative security as the priority.*⁶⁴³

Qin then describes these two philosophies in their administrative implementation as rule of morality and rule of power. In the ideal Confucian society, the ruler draws his power from being the exemplar of morality, followed by his officials for being the embodiment of the highest Way (*Dao*); while in the Legalist society, the ruler exercises his power to bring order, and the officials are not able to challenge the imperial power (*jun quan*), no matter whether it is in accordance with moral principles or not.

Whereas most critics attribute Chinese autocracy to the “servile nature” of the people, and the servility to Confucianism, Qin finds the autocratic state a result of the tension between Confucianism and Legalism. He argues that the three cardinal guides (*san gang*), widely criticized as a Confucian ruling principle, are in fact a Legalist invention to assure absolute autocratic power; and Confucianism is a facade that is used to conceal its Legalist nature.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴³ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 172.

⁶⁴⁴ Qin Hui 秦晖, “Qimeng de fansi' xueshu zuotan” “启蒙的反思” 学术座谈, in *Kaifang*

That is to say, traditional Chinese society was not one of a Confucian nature, but one in which Legalist power philosophy was implemented by the ruling class, with Confucianism being adhered to only as a matter of formality. And the legalist autocratic rule resulted in the popularity of Daoism as a response from the weaker social groups in their power relations with the ruling elite:

*Traditional China has always had the obvious tension between legalist institutional culture and Confucian classics... The first consequence... is the split or dual personality of a traditional Chinese. That explains why Daoism is such an important tradition next to Confucianism and Legalism...*⁶⁴⁵

*Daoist ideas are strongly colored by cynicism, the inaction (wuwei) conducted by the weaker to the stronger has turned into “drifting along” (gouqie)...*⁶⁴⁶

In such a ternary socio-cultural structure, Qin contends, Confucianism takes the most awkward position: in appearance, it is the most respected ideology; in reality, its survival is constantly at stake. Qin further argues that Confucian idealists have always felt the dual intrusion from Legalist power philosophy and Daoist cynicism⁶⁴⁷ because the combination of a strong Legalist rule and a cynical social reaction towards it constantly weakened Confucian philosophy:

*In the autocratic times in Chinese history, real Confucian idealism as a school of thinking has been hanging by a thread...Traditional culture as a whole has been mainly constructed by the complementary ideologies of Legalism and Cynicism rather than the formally respected ruling ideology of Confucianism.*⁶⁴⁸

With Confucian theories on ethics and morality in a predicament, the influence of Confucianism in society was considerably limited. In the perception of Qin Hui, that is why, contrary to what cultural determinism claims, Confucianism is neither the source of vice nor is it the origin of virtue. Apparently, what forms the real cause of many Chinese social and cultural problems is, in his eyes, the anti-liberal Legalist tradition

Shidai 开放时代 March, 2006, p. 23.

⁶⁴⁵ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 184.

⁶⁴⁶ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 185.

⁶⁴⁷ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 186-189.

⁶⁴⁸ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 190.

implemented by the imperial court. As such, he holds Legalist tradition, instead of Confucian tradition, responsible for the state of autocracy:

*...Only the schools that are extremely anti-liberalist, such as Chinese Legalism, propose the evil nature of the people. It does not have faith in anything else but the use of punishment, tactics and power.*⁶⁴⁹

2) The Twist in Anti-traditionalism: Late Qing to the May Fourth Movement

Based on Qin Hui's analysis of the traditional socio-cultural structure, his evaluation of anti-traditionalism around the New Culture Movement contradicts those of the critics of the national character. In a way, his standpoint against anti-Confucianism is more similar to Chen Lai's cultural stance. He shares Chen's idea that Confucianism was subject to undue criticism, and he proposes to rescue Confucianism from its crisis by disassociating it with autocracy and ills in society.

However, he also refutes the notion that Confucianism was the hegemonic ruling philosophy, a notion that has been shared by both guardians and critics of Confucianism analyzed in the previous two chapters. Instead, Qin shifts the focus away from Confucianism itself and towards the interplay between Confucianism and Legalism. In such a light, his interpretation of the intellectual movements of the late Qing and early Republican periods becomes quite different from the perceptions I have previously discussed. Hence, the influence of Western thought around that time is also read in a new light:

*When Western ideas on liberty and democracy first came to China, what they initially conflicted with was not Confucian ideas, but the autocratic Legalist ruling philosophy and institutions. Therefore, many of the imperial officials with Confucian ideals, due to their antipathy towards Legalism, embraced Western liberal and democratic values with enthusiasm. From the Opium War to the Hundred Day Reforms, the mainstream school of "learning from the West" was to import Western liberty and democracy, and to save Confucianism from Legalism.*⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁹ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 181.

⁶⁵⁰ Qin Hui 秦晖, "Wanqing ruzhe yin xi jiu ru" 晚清儒者引西救儒 (2010), online article available at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4b5299520100khio.html

For a staunch advocate of liberty and democracy as Qin Hui, this initial intellectual movement seems to be leading the socio-political development of the late Qing in the right direction. In this regard, his reading of late Qing intellectual history differs significantly from the historical reading by Chen Lai. Whereas Chen Lai regards the movement to learn from the West as largely prompted by an instrumental urge to strengthen the country without giving up the fundamental political structure or values, Qin Hui believes that it was initially drawn by the intrinsic value of Western ideas such as liberty and democracy.

However, in Qin Hui's narrative, the movement of learning from the West took a fundamental turn for the worse after the Hundred Day Reforms failed, which brought it towards a path opposite to what was initially envisioned by the reformers:

*Learning from the West gradually became a way of enriching the country and strengthening its military power. This turned many towards Legalism and against Confucianism. Therefore, standing completely opposite to the original process of Western learning, the most radical advocates of Western learning became the most radical advocates against Confucianism. This was an obvious transition in 1898, which led to the direction of centralization or totalism. I call it the road towards Legalism—leading towards the system of Qin Shihuang.*⁶⁵¹

According to Qin Hui, the result of this turn was that around the May Fourth Movement, cultural critiques or the national character criticism seemed to have overshadowed the criticism of the autocratic state. In his words, the cultural critique started as a movement that was “pro-Confucianism, pro-Westernization, anti-Legalism and Daoism”;⁶⁵² but on its way, it turned into holding Confucianism responsible for the national character that was deemed incompatible with the West.

As such, when the anti-traditional movement imported Western thought to criticize Confucianism, it stimulated on the contrary many Confucian scholars to reject Western thoughts in order to preserve Confucian ideals, pushing them away from what they originally meant to learn. Consequently, Qin believes that the universal conflict between modern spirit and medieval inertia was overshadowed in the New Culture

⁶⁵¹ Interview with Qin Hui on February 23, 2011.

⁶⁵² Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 231.

Movement by the symbolic conflict between Western and Chinese cultures.

This is where Qin believes that the May Fourth Movement became very problematic: it should not have equated autocracy with Confucianism and placed both at the opposite side of Western thought. The enlightenment movement, in order to save the nation, mistakenly targeted Confucianism instead of the autocratic state.⁶⁵³ And the consequences of such a mistake were devastating, as Qin describes: “After we revolted against the Confucian thesis of benevolence and justice, and its tradition of leniency, goodness, respect, thrift and patience, we were getting further away from, instead of closer to, democracy and constitutional governance”.⁶⁵⁴

Therefore, although Qin Hui recognizes the significance of the May Fourth Movement in its ideological enlightenment, he is of the opinion that, tragically, one of the legacies of the May Fourth Movement was the triumph of Legalism over both Confucianism and Western liberalism, which resulted in “the intensified autocratic state”:

...The seed of crisis—the mutually complementary Legalism and Daoism—was overlooked and even empowered (jili). Eventually, while Western liberty and democracy perished together with traditional Confucian morality and justice, “power philosophy” (qiangquan zhhexue) and “cynic philosophy” (quanru zhhexue) further intensified each other, and reached a unified control to an unprecedented extent.

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3) Anti-Confucianism: Radical or Conservative?

Once Qin Hui establishes his argument that anti-Confucianism was due to a misjudgment of the socio-cultural structure, he goes on to ask the question as to why, in the process of social and cultural reforms, Confucianism became the unfortunate wrong target. The apparent reason is that Confucianism was always regarded as the ruling ideology of the imperial court, as well as representative of Chinese culture. Neither guardians nor critics of Confucianism realized that it was a façade that the ruling elite painted to conceal the Legalist nature of the imperial administration. Therefore, the movement of anti-traditionalism became one of anti-Confucianism.

⁶⁵³ Qin, “Qimeng de fansi”, p. 24.

⁶⁵⁴ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 197.

⁶⁵⁵ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 231.

Aside from that, Qin contends that in the cultural comparison between Chinese and Western cultures, whether it was the Chinese comparing their own culture with those of Western nations or, vice versa, the observers tended to agree that Chinese society was community-based and Western societies were individual-based.

This, then, was added by the fact that Chinese learning from the West was combined with a dream of strengthening the nation, which stimulated aspirations for a strong state. Such an enlightenment movement “could hardly bring about deep reflection on the tradition of autocracy within the bigger community”. Such a tendency, Qin Hui explains, was manifested, for example, in Chen Duxiu’s differentiation of “the military West and the literary China”.⁶⁵⁶ Because the powerful military presence of the West had proven a strong state to be useful, the pursuit of individual liberty and rights were not directed against the bigger patriarchal community—the state, but against the smaller patriarchal community—the family.

Because both the critics and the guardians of Chinese tradition had their eyes on the smaller patriarchal community and Confucianism instead of Legalism, and the anti-traditional movement did not threaten the Legalist autocratic state. Learning from the West, originally a movement to aid Confucianism against Legalist state, eventually helped Legalism to reject Confucianism. It is in this sense that Qin Hui calls it “the tragedy of Enlightenment” (*qimeng de beiju*)⁶⁵⁷. To use Qin Hui’s metaphor, Jing Ke, in his attempted assassination of Emperor Qin Shihuang, thrust his dagger in Confucius whom he set out to rescue from Qin Shihuang’s tyranny.

Therefore, the anti-traditionalism in the New Culture Movement becomes in the eyes of Qin Hui a misjudgment of the causes of social problems, rather than a manifestation of what Chen Lai regards as radicalism. In fact, Qin Hui describes this phenomenon as “pseudo-radicalism”. In his understanding, the national character criticism was to a large degree pseudo-radical because it only aimed at Confucianism, not the autocratic Legalist state.

I think the May Fourth New Culture Movement was severely problematic, not because it was too radical or not radical enough, but because of its selection and judgment of tradition. I think it negated too much where it should not have, that is, Confucianism; and did not

⁶⁵⁶ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 233-239.

⁶⁵⁷ Qin, “Zai jixu qimeng zhong fansi qimeng”, p. 24.

*negate where it should, that is, Legalism.*⁶⁵⁸

For the same reason, he criticizes the cultural fever of the 1980s as having relegated the real social issues into a simplified cultural question. The tendency to reduce everything into “culture” obfuscated modern notions such as liberal democracy or social democracy into “Western culture”; and in such a process, by dwelling on the differences between China and the West, it minimized the differences between the past and the present. Consequently, there is no real debate between the conservative and radical standpoints.⁶⁵⁹ On this note, despite the significance of the 1980s in terms of “intellectual enlightenment”, Qin Hui prefers to think of anti-traditionalism during the cultural fever as another tide of pseudo-radicalism.

If the cultural critique during the 1980s was pseudo-radicalism, which is different from the radicalism against autocracy, the appraisal of the so-called cultural tradition since the 1990s can be called pseudo-conservatism, for Qin is of the opinion that it has often been prompted by commercial incentives and drifted far from a genuine movement to preserve the Confucian spirit. Though he claims that “‘pseudo’ only points to the fact that it is not genuine, but does not necessarily mean it is negative”⁶⁶⁰, he nonetheless criticizes that both pseudo-radicalism and pseudo-conservatism originated from a cultural misinterpretation of the real social issues. And in his eyes, these real issues have little to do with being “radical” or “conservative”:

*The transitions in the past were full of uncertainties...you cannot attribute them to a determinist cause and say that Chinese people are too conservative or too radical. It applies to any nation. I think history is an objective yet basically uncertain process.*⁶⁶¹

These uncertainties leave opportunities for those who are willing to “sacrifice for the mediocre, and to actively fight for others yet not to subdue others”.⁶⁶² In a preface Qin Hui wrote for the writer and cultural critic Yu Jie (b. 1973), he commented that “Yu Jie’s anti-traditionalism is no doubt influenced by the May Fourth cultural critique, Lu Xun’s cultural criticism and the style of the culturally rebellious Li Ao and Bo Yang”.

⁶⁵⁸ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁵⁹ Qin, “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, p. 138.

⁶⁶⁰ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 165.

⁶⁶¹ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁶² Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 196.

⁶⁶³ Qin, “Kegui de fengmang”, p. 173.

While many regarded Yu Jie's anti-traditionalism as "reverse racism" that jeopardizes the national spirit, Qin defended Yu and contended that he "does not agree to blame the so-called 'reverse racism' for the weakening of the national spirit".⁶⁶⁴

Then he went on to argue that Yu Jie's work has its "valuable edge"; and that Yu's critical attitude belongs to an important part of the Confucian intellectual tradition—to criticize social injustice through public opinion. As much as Qin disagrees to associate the national character with issues past and present, he has nothing against criticism towards social issues. In fact, this is precisely what Qin Hui has been doing through his critical inquiries.

5.3. Confucian Spirit in a Liberal Society

Qin Hui's criticism of cultural determinism suggests that, to change or improve the social-cultural behavior of a nation, it is not the people that have to be reformed, as the national character critics claimed. According to him, it is the socio-political institutions and structures that bred certain social behaviors that should be reformed in order to reach a more desirable form of society.

The underlying assumption is that, in the case of Chinese culture, once the institutional structure of the patriarchal society changes, the national culture as a social and historical phenomenon will transform into a modern one too. In the process of such a transformation, many of the cultural legacies, including Confucianism and Daoism, will transmute as well.

Therefore, the question Qin Hui poses is *not* how to reform the people, or the Confucian tradition that allegedly created the characteristics of the people, *but* how to transform "peasant states, agricultural civilizations, and traditional societies" into "citizen states, industrial civilizations, and modern societies".⁶⁶⁵ Apparently, his socio-political choice would be a liberal society with a social-democratic political system.

To achieve such a goal, the vicious circle has to be deconstructed of the Legalist philosophy of the ruler and cynical philosophy of the ruled. And Qin's cultural proposal is what he calls "the alliance of Western thought and Confucianism that

⁶⁶⁴ Qin, "Kegui de fengmang", p. 174.

⁶⁶⁵ Qin, "The Common Baseline", p. 13.

replaces the complimentary Legalism and Daoism” (*xi ru huirong, jiegou fa dao hubu*).⁶⁶⁶ So the question becomes, in the proposal of “the alliance of Western thought and Confucianism”, what is Qin Hui’s perception of “Confucianism” and “Western thought” respectively, and how does he envision the role of both in such an alliance?

1) Confucianism as the Local Source of Anti-autocracy

Confucianism is the most important part of the historical legacies in Qin Hui’s outlook for a modern Chinese culture. As he contends, Confucianism is not the main obstacle to China’s progress—it is not the source of vice, nor is it the origin of virtue. In fact, Qin believes that its influence in society is considerably limited by Legalism and cynicism, resulting in “Legalist Confucianism” and “Daoist Confucianism”. And he argues that these two schools of Confucianism do not represent the more intrinsic, “real essence of Chinese culture”.⁶⁶⁷

However, despite the intrusion of Legalism and cynicism, the “real Confucian idealism” as a school of thinking, as Qin puts it, “has not yet lost its brilliance.”⁶⁶⁸ And this real idealism can be found in what he calls “the third school” of Confucian theories on ethics and morality, which has survived the long history of autocratic rules:

*Tan Sitong’s On Benevolence, Kang Youwei’s Datong Shu, New-Confucianists like Zhang Junmai and Liang Shumin, formed a local source of anti-autocracy, though it has only been a non-mainstream culture for over two thousand years.*⁶⁶⁹

This cultural legacy and “source of anti-autocracy” that he finds in these Confucian scholars is the idea of people-orientation (*minben*). As Qin continues to articulate, though very much a “local” expression, *minben* reflects the pursuit of a democratic principle that is humanistic and universal. In his own words, “Western or Confucian, there is no cultural barrier between free thinkers”.⁶⁷⁰

To demonstrate that the most fundamental humanist spirit and values can be shared, he then takes the philosopher and political theorist Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) of the late

⁶⁶⁶ Qin, “Zhidu pengzhuang”, p. 99.

⁶⁶⁷ Qin, “Zhidu pengzhuang”, p. 98.

⁶⁶⁸ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 190.

⁶⁶⁹ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 229.

⁶⁷⁰ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 229.

Ming and early Qing Dynasty as an example:

*Some of the ideas of Huang Zongxi have touched upon the fundamental concept of modern liberalism, that is, the nature of autocracy lies in its deprivation of individual rights, or its oppression of individual freedom—any autocracy is eventually an autocracy from the community to the individual.*⁶⁷¹

It seems that Qin Hui seeks from his “third school” of Confucian thought a spirit that is both of Confucian tradition and modern, both Chinese and universal. Yet it has to be noted that, although he regards this spirit as a local source of anti-autocracy, and emphasizes the idea of *minben* as potentially modern and universal, he does not try to look for a kind of equivalent of the modern Western notion of democracy (*minzhu*) in *minben*. On the contrary, as Davies argues, Qin Hui does not support the claim that the Confucian notion of *minben* is analogous to the modern concept of democracy; and he “warns against the use of facile analogies in the bid to promote a progressive Confucianism”.⁶⁷²

What Qin Hui intends to find in this *minben* concept is a Chinese expression of a humanist value that could ally with liberalism against autocracy, for he believes that “it is possible to unite the modern civic consciousness and Confucian tradition”.⁶⁷³ To him, this is the key to the Chinese transition from a peasant state and a traditional society to a citizen state and a modern society. Furthermore, such a transition will eventually change the outlook of Chinese culture, for, once Confucianism and Daoism are freed from the oppression of Legalism, they are provided a chance to transmute in a modern society.

2) Confucianism as a Transcendent Spirit

As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, Qin Hui’s perception of modernization is one with values upheld by both liberalism and social democracy. If he sees Confucianism as a source of anti-autocracy, how does he envision the joint venture of the Western enterprise of liberalism and the local resource of Confucianism in the process of modernization?

⁶⁷¹ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 222-4.

⁶⁷² Davies, *Worrying about China*, pp. 131-132.

⁶⁷³ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 241-7.

The answer has to be sought, first of all, in Qin's understanding of liberalism. According to him, liberalism departs from the assumption that morality is limited, and therefore it bases its institutional arrangement on the limited morality or the "human nature of vice". As liberalism believes that a society cannot be built by relying on "the autocracy of the virtuous", or "the reckoning of the wise", it focuses on drawing "the bottom line"—the most fundamental principles that one should not compromise:

*The system built upon the thesis of limited morality aims at preventing people from crossing the bottom line to fall into the abyss of evil, yet this bottom line is open to any higher possibility—we do not know whether it will vigorously elevate human nature to a higher level, but at least it does not prevent such an elevation.*⁶⁷⁴

However, a liberal society, despite its advantages in offering a practical framework to draw the bottom line, does not come into being automatically. Qin argues that, although it is "common sense" that liberty is preferred over autocracy, liberal societies only make up a small proportion among all human societies. In Qin's conception, this is determined by the nature of liberalism as an ideology:

*The difficulties of fulfilling liberalism is a universal problem, which is unrelated to "culture" or so-called national characteristics, either positive or negative.*⁶⁷⁵

Again, this is the major difference between Qin Hui and the liberal critics of national character. When it comes to the problem of liberalism in China, cultural critics tend to attribute it to Confucian culture and the servility of the people. Qin Hui, on the contrary, argues that the problem does not lie in "the cultural genes", or "the lack of theoretical resources", but in liberalism itself:

*People with liberal ideals have to be willing to sacrifice for the rights of the mediocre, and not expect anything in return from the mediocre—and this is not necessarily related to any "national defects" of the Chinese people.*⁶⁷⁶

Qin describes the principle of liberalism as "to keep one's own individual freedom, to respect the freedom of others, and to actively pursue liberty and oppose any

⁶⁷⁴ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 182.

⁶⁷⁵ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 194.

⁶⁷⁶ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 193.

enforcement by another to anyone else.”⁶⁷⁷ Yet, according to this logic, one cannot force liberty on anyone else. As he further articulates:

*The two main convictions of liberalism are that the world is diverse (factual judgment), and the world should be diverse (value judgment). Therefore, a liberal does not hope to build a world dominated by liberalism, nor does he hope to persuade or even subdue others...The only argument that liberalism requires is to prove that one should not subdue others (value judgment) and one cannot persuade others (factual judgment).*⁶⁷⁸

That is why, in the pursuit of secular liberalism, Qin calls for a “transcendent spirit of Martyrdom (*xunjiao*)”—a spirit to sacrifice for the mediocre, and to actively fight for others, yet not to subdue others.⁶⁷⁹ In other words, the realization of a liberal Chinese society needs a kind of altruistic spirit to solve the practical dilemma caused by the inner logic of liberalism. Since China is not a country of Christian culture as is the case with most Western countries, Qin argues, such a transcendent spirit has to be found within the Chinese cultural tradition.

*For liberalism to be recognized by the people, a local symbolic system is needed. To promote a modern value system would require a Chinese style expression.*⁶⁸⁰

*In fact, the so-called “heaven” in Chinese culture is not, at least not completely, a transcendent religious conception. It has a strong secular color...and does not rely on the transcendent belief or the respect and fear for “the other world”.*⁶⁸¹

The strong secular nature of Chinese society does not provide a local expression of altruistic spirit in the same religious sense as what Christianity used to do in the formation of Western liberal societies. Qin searches for it in the equally transcendent Confucian idealistic “sage spirit”, which he interprets as “to endeavor social righteousness as a nobody; and to cultivate one’s own virtue as a somebody” (*qiong ze*

⁶⁷⁷ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 193.

⁶⁷⁸ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 181.

⁶⁷⁹ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, p. 196.

⁶⁸⁰ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 241-247.

⁶⁸¹ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, p. 215.

jianji tianxia, da ze dushan qishen).⁶⁸² That means, the “nobody” needs to increase the awareness of his own rights; the “somebody” needs to limit his obsession with power. This is obviously his antidote against what he identifies as the complementary structure of Legalism and cynicism, and also his antidote against the dilemma of liberalism itself.

3) The Convergence of Confucianism and Liberalism

Qin Hui’s conceptions of real Confucian idealism and liberalism provide him with an outlook of a Western-Confucian convergence in the future of Chinese culture. According to Qin, “the transition from autocracy to democracy is never an objective law or an inevitable process”.⁶⁸³ That is why the development of liberalism in China needs to draw from the transcendent spirit in order to overcome its inherent dilemma.

However, Confucian idealism tries to build a society on top of the presumption of the Confucian principle of morality and the eternal good nature of sages, which Qin sees as too high a standard to be achieved in social reality; the social order simply cannot be achieved by relying on the virtue of the sage, or a few Confucian exemplars at the highest moral ground.

As he asks, how does Confucianism provide a practical institutional design to maintain social order?⁶⁸⁴ This question takes the alternative perspective to look at the convergence of liberalism and Confucianism. To put it the other way around, liberalism provides Confucianism the institutional and instrumental support to break the dual oppression of Legalism and cynicism.

It is Qin’s belief that Confucianism is subject to manipulation of the Legalist autocratic power without the liberal principles to draw the bottom line. In order to break from “the incubus of being raped by the complementary structure of Legalism and Daoism”, Qin argues, Confucianism has to be developed from “a study of mind” to “a study of institutions or socio-political systems”,⁶⁸⁵ specifically aiming at the deconstruction of the complementary Legalism and Daoism and autocratic power.

In this sense, the alliance of liberalism and Confucianism is a proposal, in Qin Hui’s

⁶⁸² Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, pp. 199-200.

⁶⁸³ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁸⁴ Qin, “Qimeng de fansi”, p. 25.

⁶⁸⁵ Qin, “Xi ru huirong”, pp. 241-247.

understanding, to strive for a passive liberty with a proactive attitude, to hold on to secular liberal principles with transcendent Confucian virtue, to follow a seemingly selfish pursuit of individual rights with altruistic sacrifice, and to benefit the mediocre with a highly idealistic sage spirit.⁶⁸⁶

As I mentioned previously, Qin Hui describes himself as taking a “third path” and having a “superimposition” of both liberalism and social democracy. Can we conclude that he is also taking a third path in the cultural realm? Based on the analysis of his cultural perceptions and imaginations, such a description does reflect his standpoint as compared to those intellectuals studied in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

Yet it is worthwhile to mention that Qin Hui is not alone down this path. The influential liberal scholar, Zhu Xueqin, for instance, also states that his understanding of liberalism entails “an ethical code” to protect different values.⁶⁸⁷ To be more specific, he articulates it as a standpoint that is politically democratic, economically supportive of a free market, and culturally conservative.⁶⁸⁸ Such a description is also applicable to Qin Hui.

Qin takes many inside and outside China as embodiment of what he refers to as “true liberalism”. For instance, he speaks highly of Tan Sitong’s sacrifice for his beliefs, as well as Huang Zongxi’s idea of minben. At the same time, he finds the liberal principles from the endeavors of Czech liberal Václav Havel, and Qin’s “true social democracy” is inspired by the Chilean Salvador Allende.⁶⁸⁹ In a word, as Qin sees it, Confucian moral idealism can be combined with modern principles of human rights, liberty and democracy. Therefore, while many with a liberal mind criticize Confucianism as the main obstacle in the modernization process, Qin on the contrary is of the opinion that it can solve the problem of implementing liberalism, and he envisions the future of liberalism in China as such:

The political future of China will be more and more modern, that means, more and more lenient, with an increasing stress on negotiation and contractual arrangements among different interest

⁶⁸⁶ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, pp. 193 & 196.

⁶⁸⁷ Zhu Xueqin, “For a Chinese Liberalism,” in Wang Chaohua (ed.), *One China, Many Paths*, pp. 87-107: 105.

⁶⁸⁸ Zhu Xueqin, “Sixiang zai poju, gaige yao kaifang—Zhu Xueqin fangtanlu” 思想在破局，改革要开放——朱学勤访谈录 in *Nanfang dushi bao* 南方都市报 Dec. 30, 2007.

⁶⁸⁹ Qin, “Dividing the Big Family Assets”, p. 156.

groups. Then there is possibility for the so-called constitutional system.⁶⁹⁰ Such a constitutional system with compatible power and responsibility should be the contractual result of negotiation based on the most universal human nature. Therefore, it is not limited to any certain culture; nor should it be constrained by any particular culture.

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It is precisely on these grounds that he rejects the national character criticism and what he calls the “cultural determinism” that is reflected in such criticism. In his perception, as Confucianism and liberalism are not mutually exclusive, there is a common ground to develop modern Chinese civilization with the Confucian ideal of personal perfection of virtue and endeavour for society, Western conceptions of liberty, human rights and rule of law, as well as the socialist ideal of justice and community.⁶⁹² And it is on top of such a common ground that he perceives Chinese-Western cultural differences and the place of Chinese culture in the world.

4) Liberalism and Nationalism

Qin Hui’s view of culture, especially his distinction between the socially determined cultural phenomena and the aesthetically related cultural preferences, has greatly influenced his perception of the position of Chinese culture in the world. In terms of the former type of culture that he relates to socio-political systems, his liberal belief supports an improvement of social institutions and thereby improvement in the cultural realm. When it comes to the latter type of culture, Qin regards them as a matter of emotionally charged cultural identity that is not subject to rational comparison or evaluation.

The issue of nationalism and national identity, in the eyes of Qin Hui, falls into the latter category. As he puts it, national or cultural identity is essentially “an identity of pure aesthetic symbols”.⁶⁹³ Similarly, true nationalism originates from a natural affection towards the nation. And this affection is derived from the perception of the

⁶⁹⁰ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁹¹ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁹² Qin Hui 秦晖, “Qiong ze jianji tianxia, da ze dushan qishen,” 穷则兼济天下，达则独善其身 in idem., *Chuantong shi lun*, pp. 259-260.

⁶⁹³ Qin Hui, “Ziyou zhuyi yu minzu zhuyi de qihedian zai nali?” 自由主义与民族主义的契合点在哪里 in *Dongfang* 东方 *Orient* (May 1996), pp. 45-48.

nation as family, as one of Qin's articles suggests.⁶⁹⁴ As Davies points out, Qin's conception reflects that the language of Chinese intellectuals is "saturated with figurations of the nation as the domestic intimacy of home and family" with "an unquestioned ethos of communal or collective responsibility".⁶⁹⁵

In this light, such sentiments can be shared by people of different political and social convictions and, according to Qin Hui, they should be independent from the agenda of the state or national interests. That is to say, emotional identification with a nation or its culture is not to be affected by rational identification with a certain socio-political system. In this sense, true nationalism is certainly not negative, if not positive. That is why Qin contends that he never considered Chinese nationalism to be excessive, neither is he concerned with the nationalistic sentiments of Chinese people.⁶⁹⁶

This view seems to suggest a distinction between cultural nationalism and political nationalism. That is, identification with a nation's culture does not necessarily entail an xenophobic tendency as is often seen in political nationalism. As Qin Hui sees it, many issues of nationalism that appeared as cultural conflicts are in fact the result of conflicts of national interests, or better said, the conflicts of interests among different states.

Yet again, Qin Hui emphasizes that what he regards as "true nationalism" and national identity should be based upon "the realization of civil rights and democracy".⁶⁹⁷ He argues that people without human rights do not have strong national sentiments out of his or her own dignity. Rather, their nationalistic sentiments are subject to the manipulation of the state, sometimes even regardless of what is right or wrong.⁶⁹⁸ In that case, the discussion goes beyond Qin's cultural conception of "true nationalism"; instead, it belongs to the subject of state nationalism.

Taking it a step further, from a liberal standpoint, he goes on to defend his universal humanist concern and argues that it overrides nationalism. According to him, liberal value is a universal value that transcends the boundaries of nation-states:

A universal liberalism that requires free circulation of global resources, though not a form of nationalism, does offer a new moral

⁶⁹⁴ See Qin, "Dividing the Big Family Assets".

⁶⁹⁵ Davies, *Worrying About China*, p. 61.

⁶⁹⁶ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁶⁹⁷ Qin, "Ziyou zhuyi yu minzu zhuyi", p. 45.

⁶⁹⁸ Interview with Qin Hui.

ideal that is beyond nation and culture, an outlook of universal freedom and justice, and an idea of a world with equal opportunities.

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Universalism might sometimes override nationalism or nationalistic sentiments, but it does not necessarily mean that one has to betray one's natural affection towards one's nation in order to pursue liberal values. In the optimistic scenario, the pursuit of a universal liberalism will bring about global equality, which, for a late-developing country, is in line with the nationalistic demand for an equal and just international order. And that is what Qin perceives as the conjunction of liberalism and nationalism.

Therefore, it is not surprising, if we follow Qin's distinction between true nationalism and state nationalism, that he approaches the subject of China's position in the world in the same way. As he puts it, the so-called rise of China has two meanings: one is the position of the state; the other is the position of the people.⁷⁰⁰ And this distinction has to be stressed whenever one speaks of the rise of China or the status of the Chinese nation as compared to other nations.

In modern history, Qin contends, the turning point for the international position of the Chinese state is "the Twenty-One Demands" (1915), a set of demands from Japan that were perceived as an attempt to establish a Japanese protectorate over China. From then on, during the Nationalist government and the PRC period, the position of the state has indeed been rising internationally. However, when it comes to the status of Chinese people or Chinese citizens, Qin Hui is less optimistic—he sees it as very low, both at home and abroad:

*This is a society that does not respect civil rights, if not human rights...
The diplomacy of a "state of the people" should be diplomacy "for the people", and not "for the Emperor"...*⁷⁰¹

This is a problem that is closely related to autocracy in Qin Hui's understanding. With the absence of the "common baseline", according to Qin's reading of modern Chinese history, the rise of the state is possible, but the outlook for a higher status of the Chinese people is rather gloomy. And it is exactly for this reason that Qin Hui proposes a convergence of liberalism and Confucianism.

⁶⁹⁹ Qin, "Ziyou zhuyi yu minzu zhuyi", p. 48.

⁷⁰⁰ Interview with Qin Hui.

⁷⁰¹ Interview with Qin Hui.

5.4. Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Qin Hui's rejection of the discourse of national character in this chapter has demonstrated the cultural viewpoints of a Chinese intellectual who holds a political-economic view of liberalism with a social democratic emphasis on equality. His cultural proposal to converge the Confucian transcendent spirit with liberal values places him in an interesting position between the cultural critics of Chinese national character and the guardians of Confucian tradition.

Qin "defends the values of universalism",⁷⁰² yet this universalism does not apply to what he regards as the aesthetic cultural preferences formed through a common national history. His conception of universal value is confined to the field of socio-political arrangements, but not in the realm of aesthetical culture. When it comes to the latter, he holds firm to a pluralism that views national culture as incomparable and cultural differences as something reasonable and to be respected.

Many of Qin Hui's cultural standpoints seem similar to those of Chen Lai's. They share a rejection of the national character discourse, a vision of a positive role for Confucianism, a sympathy for what Qin calls true nationalism, and a call for humanistic values in China. Yet their common cultural views come from rather different points of departure.

Whereas Chen Lai criticizes the national character discourse as a negation of historical continuity—part of the anti-traditionalism that is intimately related to cultural radicalism, Qin Hui rejects it as a representative of what he calls "cultural determinism", emphasizing the fact that it relegates complex social issues to a simplified and generalized question of culture. Following the logic of cultural determinism, one tends to draw the conclusion that the national defects, especially the so-called servile nature of the people, have resulted in the state of autocracy in China; and if the national character is not reformed, it will continue to lead the country through this pre-determined path towards an unchangeable autocracy. It is this interpretation of China's past and outlook of its future that Qin Hui argues against.

Qin Hui rejects cultural determinism because he believes that culture is not the cause of social problems, rather the historical consequence of social institutions and systems.

⁷⁰² Qin, "The Common Baseline", p. 16.

And this rejection not only applies to its “critical” form, but also to its “conservative” form. To be more specific, he disagrees with cultural determinism of a critical nature and argues that many issues in Chinese society are not caused by the Confucian cultural tradition; at the same time, he also warns against the idea that Confucianism itself will necessarily offer a solution to China’s modernization or to the problem of modernity elsewhere.

On the one hand, he believes that the solution to social cultural issues has to be found in institutional changes, and such changes have to be made by adopting liberal principles such as human rights, democracy and rule of law. Only in this way can social reforms free people, in particular peasants, from their patriarchal social confinement to become modern citizens, thereby transforming peasant culture into modern culture. In his perception, Chinese people, if given the opportunity, prefer to enjoy their individual rights and freedom just as much as people elsewhere. Their aesthetics might differ from those of other nations, due to a distinctive cultural past, yet they share a universal human nature of a preference for liberty over autocracy.

On the other hand, his understanding of the dilemma of liberalism guides him to look for a sort of transcendent spirit as its antidote. And he finds in the Confucian intellectual tradition the Chinese “sage spirit” that sacrifices out of moral idealism. Obviously, such a conception of the spirit of Confucianism is very different from that of Chen Lai’s. For Chen, Confucianism is a relation-oriented humanistic philosophy, and the Confucian cultural spirit lies in its emphasis on filial piety, intimate human relations, the value of people and respect for morality (*zhongxiao, qinren, guimin, chongde*).⁷⁰³ But Qin Hui finds the spirit of Confucianism embodied in the highly elitist and idealistic “sacrifice for the mediocre”.

Qin Hui and Chen Lai also have different outlooks on Confucianism in society. Whereas Chen Lai perceives an ideal society as one based on morality, Qin Hui contends that, as appealing as it may sound, such an ideal of moral high-ground is too far from social reality. With regard to the individual, Confucianism stresses responsibility and obligation, and Confucian morality focuses on introspection and cultivation; but there is little discussion on the issue of how to achieve individual rights.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰³ Chen, “Rujia sixiang de genyuan”, p. 38.

⁷⁰⁴ Qin, “Qimeng de fansi”, p. 25.

On this note, Qin argues that many of the discussions from the New-Confucian school are limited to the metaphysical level, and do not touch upon the institutional question. To him, metaphysical discussions do not offer a solution to the problem of social institutions.⁷⁰⁵ Hence, he proposes to draw a bottom line to ensure individual rights, which does not require higher moral standards but still has the potential to attain them. As such, Qin Hui holds a cultural perception that differs not only from that of the cultural critics, but also from those of the New-Confucian school who reject the discourse of national character.

Aside from their differences in the rejection of the national character discourse and their understandings of Confucianism, Qin Hui and Chen Lai also perceive the issue of national identity in a different light. Chen Lai approaches the question of Chinese culture and its place in the world from a philosophical point of view, and stresses his “cultural subjectivity” in a pursuit of historical continuity. Qin Hui, while also claiming the autonomy for national culture in its aesthetic sense, focuses on identifying problems in the socio-political system and mending these problems by implementing universal humanist values.

Whereas Chen Lai views Chinese nationalism as a natural collective response towards Western imperialist intrusion, using the metaphor of “the bent twig”; Qin Hui, although defending “true nationalism” as affection for the nation, does not see it as necessarily a response towards imperialism. Moreover, just as many cultural critics, he is very vigilant towards any state manipulation of nationalistic sentiments, which he distinguishes from his notion of true nationalism.

Last but not least, while both Qin Hui and Chen Lai contend that Confucianism is not an obstacle to modernization, each has his own definition of modernization. What Chen Lai means by modernization is mainly a process based on economic development. To put it simply, a modernized country is an enriched country—there is no strict distinction between the state and the nation (the people). And unlike liberal intellectuals, Chen does not speak of political democracy as a criterion for modernization.

But for Qin Hui, the concept of modernization goes far beyond “enriching the country”; the key to modernization is the freedom of the individual from the autocratic state, which is the premise for a modernized society. This notion requires the peasant to

⁷⁰⁵ Qin, “Qimeng de fansi”, p. 25.

be transformed into the citizen, to ensure that the enrichment of the country (the state) does not weaken the people. Such a socio-political understanding of modernization is more in line with the viewpoints of liberal critics of the national character.

In a way, by promoting liberal principles in a Confucian idealistic fashion, Qin Hui is practicing what he promotes as “to endeavor social righteousness as a nobody, and to cultivate one’s own virtue as a somebody”.⁷⁰⁶ With this antidote against Legalism and cynicism, he attempts to overcome the dilemma of liberalism and at the same time to strive for a better future against the uncertainties of history. As he puts it, what he believes in is a view of history that only holds oneself responsible: “If tomorrow China does not do well, we shall not be able to blame Confucius or Marx for it—only ourselves.”⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁶ Qin, *Shijian ziyou*, pp. 199-200.

⁷⁰⁷ Qin, “The Common Baseline”, p. 22.