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# Culture Fever: Utopianism and Pragmatism in Chinese Intellectuals' Search for Modernization

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**2018  
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Pomona College**

**Reflective Essay**

## Group Reflection:

The inspiration of the research is twofold: Professor Allan H. Barr's Pomona Freshman writing seminar titled China from Inside and Out and 5C's newly founded Contemporary Chinese Literature Discussion Club. Professor Barr's class exposed students to a broad range of literature on Chinese experiences. Captivated by the dichotomy of "the West and the East", which permeates numerous texts, Zelin and Yijia decided to further examine how Chinese people grappled with the often conflicting relations between Westernization and Chinese traditions as well as the sudden advent of modernity and the loss of egalitarian society by initiating the Contemporary Chinese Literature Discussion Club. Meeting in the library group study room #3 once every two weeks, four active members of the club in February 2018 decided to make the most out of the club and the resources that the library can provide by entering the Library Undergraduate Research Award.

Our understanding of the history of the movement is molded by the narratives which certain influential parties deem as strategic or essential to their survival. While it is in the interest of CCP (Communist Party of China) to erase the younger generation's memory of the 1989 Democracy Movement (hereafter 1989 Movement), most Westerners are oblivious to the existence of vibrant intellectual conversations in 1980s China, which gave birth to the catastrophic 1989 Movement. Our responsibility as burgeoning historians is to shed lights on those instrumental but often forgotten events. Zelin's final essay of Professor Barr's class was on the representation of Confucianism in River Elegy, an influential television documentary series that arguably catalyzed the 1989 Movement, so we started off with the rough idea of analyzing that movement's cultural causes. Getting started is always difficult. Even though initial research on the 1989 Movement shows rich cultural discourse in the 1980s, existing scholarship did not reveal whether the relationship between the Cultural Discussion and 1989 Movement is one of causation or correlation. Nevertheless, our preliminary research reveals that there has already been significant scholarship on the 1980s Culture phenomenon called "Culture Fever," such as Jing Wang's High Culture Fever. However, such discussions are usually on a metaphysical level that examine the overarching trend in the intellectual movement rather than specific cases. We decided to provide a more balanced account of the Culture Fever at its heyday around 1985, showing how it manifested in literature,

magazines, and popular movies. We also situated the discussions in a global context as well as among the three waves of the Chinese intellectual movements.

The library has been vital to our research process. We decided to unearth all the resources we could find related to the 1989 Movement and 1980s Culture Fever. The outcome of our search was overwhelming: we found over three dozens of scholarships on our topic of interest. Fortunately, in our first meeting with her, librarian Rebecca Halpern guided us to identify useful books and papers with some preliminary searches on Google Scholars and organize our citation with Zotero. Later in the research process, the Asian Library Specialist Zou Xiuying generously provided us with valuable information regarding where to look for academic papers on China and locating primary sources in Chinese. Of great help was China Academic Journals and China Data Center, without which the analysis of the magazine Reading 读书 would have been impossible.

The third part of the essay, Three Examples of Schools of Thought, is dedicated to exploring and reconstructing the general trend of thought in the 1980s. The most direct way to achieve this was to look at the primary sources, including the writings of key participants of the "Culture Fever." We narrowed our focus to the works of a set of intellectual figures, including Gan Yang and Li Zehou. Specifically, Gan Yang's Cultural Awareness of the Eighties, which was obtained from UCLA through Claremont Colleges Library's Book Request Service, provided a very comprehensive overview of the intellectuals in the 80's and introduced us to modernization and three trends of thoughts, which were represented by three distinct schools: "Marching toward the Future," "Culture: China and the World," and China Academy of Culture. Once we had determined these three schools as our protagonists, we moved on to the China Academic Journals database of the Asian Library and found archives of each school's publications, including Li Zehou's The Duet of Enlightenment and National Salvation and reviews of Jin Guantao's Ultrastability theory in the 80's. To simplify the analysis, we further selected three typical articles representing the ideas of these three schools as shown in our paper. Over the course of reading, a sense of western-centrism common to all schools became apparent and our thesis-that the intellectuals were deeply affected by the West and modernity-became clear.

Finding the most useful sources for analyzing popular movies was a tortuous journey. What inspired our analysis about the movie critics' debate over the Golden Bear award is a recent article in Southern Weekly which summarized the famous director Zhang Yimou's career. It cited a few excerpts of criticisms published in newspapers in 1988, so I wanted to look for the full texts of these primary sources. Additionally, their titles and published dates were not mentioned. Then I tried to search up a quotation from the excerpt of Chen Haosu's article on People's Daily- "Does the Exposure of Poverty and Backwardness Make Red Sorghum a Movie that Humiliates China?" I found that it had also been quoted in the essay "The Motive and Mentality of the Export of Chinese Movies" posted on the website of The History of the PRC. From the reference section, I noticed the quote was cited from the book *Lun Zhang Yimou*, which is a collection of film reviews of Zhang's works and his interviews. I then found the book was in Honnold Mudd's Asian Library. We were excited to find that not only the primary source was included, in the section about Red Sorghum, but there were also movie reviews on aesthetic and ideological aspects, which provided ideal sources for developing our analysis in depth. As we reflected on the reason why I didn't find this book in the first place, I realized that although the movie title Red Sorghum is in the content, since the chapter names were not included in the book's digital information, the book wouldn't come up when we inputted the keywords Red Sorghum. The only way to find it is to search up the director's name. When tried to look for Chen Haosu's article, we never expected it to be in a book on the shelf only a few feet away from us.

Any successful group project demands a smooth group dynamics and full participation of each member. We are each grateful for having this opportunity to bring scholars of different disciplines into one single project: Yijia from Media Studies, Pengbo from Philosophy, Jacob International Relations, and Zelin History. The conglomeration of such disciplines privileges our project with the rewards of vastly different perspectives and ways of perceiving the world.

#### Individual Reflection (Hu Pengbo):

My initial motivation of joining this group is to further cultivate a historical question aroused in my ID1 paper. In that paper, I specifically addressed China's law and policy on publication and the press. But a critical question was left unexamined, namely, "when did China start its current policy?" With this question in my mind, my interest was drawn to Tiananmen Square movement and eventually to the "Culture Fever" in the 80's which precedes China's arbitrary censorship system.

A research in history is a rabbit hole, with new names and ideas emerging along the course. During the early preparation, we found several basic level sources about the 80's, including High Culture Fever by Jing Wang, and Contemporary China: A History since 1978 by Zheng Yongnian. A clear contrast between the West and China in the 80's is mentioned multiple times in these books, so I then journeyed to find typical intellectual thoughts addressing this dichotomy and came to discover several key figures, such as Gan Yang and Jin Guantao. Then I specifically looked into their publication on philosophy and history theory and came across their unconditional support of modernization, which subsequently led me to the modernization theory.

I used to think 80's as a mysterious period of history due to its complexity, but in exploring literature, philosophy and history resources, a clear picture of 80's has been drawn to me. Such experience that goes beyond history itself makes the people and their ideologies more vivid than just historical facts.

#### Individual Reflection (Gao Yijia):

At first, I had a broad idea to write about the general development of Chinese films throughout the 1980s, the Chinese people's reaction to films that had won international awards, such as Red Sorghum and Old Well, and the evolution of domestic awards like the Golden Rooster Awards. During the research process, I discovered a heated debate over Red Sorghum. The film critics' arguments matched the intellectuals' school of thoughts, which are detailed in Pengbo's section. Since the film had won a Western

prize, the dispute over whether to extol the award or not reflected Chinese people's ambivalent view toward Westernization, which links perfectly to our next section on River Elegy. Therefore, I decided to focus on Red Sorghum only, since the debates fit into our papers' theme more compellingly than the three broad topics I selected at first. I learned that it is better to narrow down a topic and have an in-depth analysis rather than describing a more comprehensive but vague panorama. What's more, translating the Chinese sources into English is a great challenge for me. Discussing with my group members was helpful since we have two more native Chinese speakers and a native English speaker who's also a Chinese learner. I consulted professor Allan Barr, our faculty sponsor who is also a renowned translator, to find the most accurate expression. I gained a better understanding of the Chinese texts when I needed to scrutinize them in order to translate.

#### Individual Reflection (Jacob Waldor):

I decided to participate in this project because it would show me what China's rapid changes reveal about its culture. At first, due to my limited Chinese ability, it was unclear to me how I would contribute, but when I simply explored academic books such as Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever*, I gained nuanced knowledge about the cultural movement that enabled me to ask much more sophisticated questions about it, such as whether intellectuals saw cultural change as merely a vehicle for modernization or pursued it in its own right. Because of a miscommunication with a colleague, I originally did considerable work based on the incorrect idea that nationalism would make Chinese intellectuals unwilling to denigrate China's inherent value as a nation. In addition, I performed the comparison merely to highlight that aspect of the movement. When I realized that my assumption was wrong in that certain intellectuals downplayed China's traditional virtues, I started over and also decided to perform a more holistic analysis that considered various aspects such as the range of schools of thought and the motivations of intellectuals. At the same time, however, I drove through an argument that the utopianism in China's movement is distinctive to it. However, I still failed to establish exactly the dimensions by which I wanted to compare the movements. In the

future, I need to reflect on what I want to accomplish with comparison essays. That way, I can bring objectivity and thoroughness to my analysis even while making an argument.

#### Individual Reflection (Wang Zelin):

Working on research has a humbling effect on an amateur scholar. Throwing myself into the realm of cultural discussions in 1980s China, I initially found myself overwhelmed by the quantity and depth of the often-metaphysical scholarships. Leading a group project poses another challenge since the group leader is naturally expected to be this person who has a clear idea of where the group is heading towards.

Retrospectively speaking, the LURA project has been a coming-of-age experience precisely because of the dual challenges I was presented with. With the unconditional support from Professor Allan Barr, Librarian Zou Xiuying, I successfully navigated my way through the labyrinth of academia. As the group leader, I learned how to act, delegate, and listen. Four weeks into the project, upon the completion of preliminary research, I proposed the first version of the thesis only to find other members disagreeing with me. Specifically, we disputed over the specific wording of “Chinese intellectuals carried out their self-proclaimed duty.” While some contended to replace self-proclaimed with historical, others argued to delete the adjective adjunct altogether. Though eventually, we did settle down on the phrase “self-proclaimed,” such an extended debate among the group members was an enlightening experience that reveals how people’s interpretations might be different based on the sources they engaged with. Meanwhile, I do want to acknowledge the weakness of the project. Though the primary sources we chose were representative of the era, their discussions of culture by no means exhaust all the vibrant intellectual conversations at the time. Research, in a way, is a form of history writing: the process of shedding lights on some particular subjects is accompanied by leaving out others.



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**Research Project**

**“Culture Fever: Utopianism and Pragmatism in  
Chinese Intellectuals’ Search for Modernization”**

Gao Yijia, Hu Pengbo, Jacob Waldor, and Wang Zelin

Professor Allan H. Barr

Independent Project

April 2, 2018

Cultural Fever: Utopianism and Pragmatism in Chinese Intellectuals' Search for Modernization

“Why do you always smile? Why do I need to pursue endlessly? Do you believe that I possess nothing?” In “Nothing to My Name,” or literally “Nothing I have,” Cui Jian, the father of Chinese rock, depicts an emotionally charged scene where the male protagonist laments his poverty to an unidentified female companion. After its release in 1986, the song became the first rock song that generated a nationwide sensation in China.<sup>1</sup> The “poverty” in the song resonated with millions of Chinese; however, such “poverty” might not be merely economic in nature. After the third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (hereafter, CCP) in December of 1978 redirected the official focus of the nation to economic reconstruction and “socialist modernization,”<sup>2</sup> the Chinese were freed from most but not all cultural and political restraints from the 10 tumultuous years of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (hereafter, the Cultural Revolution). Retrospectively speaking, the first five years of the 1980s in China were marked by both political and economic experimentation of reforms. Market liberalization and the de-collectivization of arable lands transformed the rural areas,

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, Gregory. ‘The East Is Red’ Goes Pop: Commodification, Hybridity, and Nationalism in Chinese Popular Song and its Televisual Performance. *Popular Music* 14 (1995): 10–24

<sup>2</sup> *11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Communiqué*. Beijing: CCP, 1978. Accessed March 29, 2018. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65371/4441902.html>

which took the leading role in 1978.<sup>3</sup> Politically, Hu Yaobang, then General Secretary of the CCP<sup>4</sup>, led a campaign to rehabilitate intellectuals and the so-called right-leaning capitalists, reversing unjust charges against them during the Cultural Revolution. Equally significant was another Hu-led campaign called “Seeking Truth from Facts and Experiences,”<sup>5</sup> which rejected dogmatic adherence to Maoism as sacred truth.<sup>6</sup>

However, both economic and political reforms encountered mounting setbacks, whose effects were not felt strongly until 1984: the experimental “labor contract system” laid off a significant portion of the urban laborers whose rights to work were guaranteed under the previous contractual system with the state; the central government’s tax revenue stagnated while its deficits increased, mainly due to tax evasion and the retention of foreign exchange by local governments; last but not least, the double-digit inflation since the early 1980s and central government’s incapacity to control the prices of commercial goods terrified Chinese urban residents. Similarly, the political reforms were as heavy-going, if not more, as the economic ones. Entangling itself in a tug of war between the liberal reformers and reactionary conservatives among the top party officials, the CCP never went beyond verbally stating the goal to develop “a high degree of democracy,” enforce the rule of law, and reduce corruption. Two student movements in the second half of the 1980s altered the course of post-Mao China. First, the students who were critical of the lack of political reform, and democratic election, in particular, protested in a number of cities from December 1986 to January 1987. Far from achieving its objective, this student movement alarmed the conservative party officials who forced Hu Yaobang to resign on the basis of his responsibilities for the “capitalistic liberalization” in China.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, the world-renowned 1989 Tiananmen Movement abruptly ended with the intervention of the People’s Liberation Army. From that point onward, the Chinese political reform has been stagnant while economic growth took on an ominously

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<sup>3</sup> Ogden, Suzanne. 2015. *China's Search for Democracy: The Student and the Mass Movement of 1989*. London: Routledge: 4-7.

<sup>4</sup> Note that Hu Yaobang is the first person to hold the title of “General Secretary of the CCP” after the elimination of “Chairman of the CCP” as the highest post in the CCP

<sup>5</sup> “Seeking Truth from Facts and Experiences □□是□□□理的唯一□准.” *People’s Daily* 人民日報, March 12, 1978. Accessed March 31, 2018. <http://data.people.com.cn.ccl.idm.oclc.org/rmr/19780512/2>.

<sup>6</sup> Yan, Ruping, Fei Tang, and Liqun Zhang. *Hu Yaobang (1915-1989)*. Beijing: Beijing Lian He Da Xue Chu Ban She (Beijing United Publishing House), 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Kwong, Julia. “The 1986 Student Demonstrations in China: A Democratic Movement?” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 9 (1988): 970-85. doi:10.2307/2644802.

positive trajectory. China's ensuing breakneck economic development, combined with escalating rampant censorship, obscures the latent cultural vacuum.

In echoing the state level struggle for socialist modernization, there was also heated discussions in the realm of philosophy and history from 1985 to 1989, in the intellectual division of the "Culture Fever." In this discussion, schools with different ideologies emerged in a robust manner. Far from merely translating some western works, holding seminars or engaging in discussions, in this "Culture Fever," groups of intellectuals and scholars, influenced by the idea of modernization, sought to provide their own narratives of the history that they unconsciously provide a justification for the modernization. They presupposed that the backwardness of China could be accounted for by analyzing the cultural aspect of the society, that is to say, the ideology, values, etc, and the discussion aroused was based on this premise. It was this nature of the modernization that led the scholars and the intellectuals to set out in the cultural realm for the sake of modernization.

Situating the 1980s Cultural Fever in a global westernization context and as one of the three major waves of the Chinese intellectual movement in the last two centuries, this paper attempts to analyze the complexities and nuances of the cultural reckoning process in the mid-1980s by examining how such process is manifested in academia, a magazine called *Reading*, a TV-series documentary titled *River Elegy (Heshang)*, and movie *Red Sorghum (Honggaoliang)*. Although different in their schools of affiliation, areas of expertise, and intended audience, in hope of a shared utopian future, Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s carried out their self-proclaimed duty to contribute to the transformation by producing different theoretical reformulations of national identity.

### **Situating China's Cultural Reckoning in a Global Context**

China's cultural reckoning is not alone in history. Throughout the world, nations have carried out intellectual movements that aim to determine the cultural characteristics that will define them going forward. Starting in Europe's periphery in Russia and Germany and later spreading to Asia, culture movements have found their impetus in the overbearing power of Western Europe, which, through imperialism, exported the anxiety it created in its peripheral nations to Asia. These movements exhibited erratic swings in attitudes towards adopting aspects

of the West and retaining tradition.<sup>8</sup> Common to all of the cultural movements we consider is an economic and power imbalance. Though China's cultural reckoning and those of other nations shared the impulse to measure up to the West, a society already undergoing rapid change is a feature unique to China. As a result, while *zhishifenzi* (Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s) evinced a utopian attitude towards the future in which they desperately hoped to carve out a role, intellectuals in other movements faced the future and their more inert nations with anxiety.

Russian intellectuals of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s found their inspiration in witnessing Russia's backwardness next to the West. Adopting Western modes of evaluation in which the East is inferior to the West, intellectuals developed a negative self-image.<sup>9</sup> Two schools of intellectual thought, those of the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, developed opposing views for producing a better self-image for Russia within this Western mode of evaluation. Similar to China's intellectual playing field, these two schools both sought to increase Russia's status in the world, but they disagreed over the issue of prizing Russian traditions or discarding them in favor of superior Western ones.<sup>10</sup> However, the motivations of Russian intellectuals differed from intellectuals in the Chinese movement. In 1830s and 1840s Russia, it was intellectuals who called for Russia to get off of its feet. Pyotr Chaadayev initiated the movement with manuscripts that started circulating in 1826.<sup>11</sup> Earning the animosity of the tsar, he jolted Russia with his words: "We have lived, as it were, outside of history, and have touched by the universal education of the human race from the world, we have given or taught nothing to the world; we have added no thoughts to the sum of human ideas; we have in no way collaborated in the progress of reason and we have disfigured everything that penetrated to us from this progress."<sup>12</sup> In China, on the other hand, intellectuals, witnessing a China already eagerly transforming, sought to make it onto the bandwagon of modernization. By establishing a theoretical framework with which to proceed with modernization, intellectuals hoped to make a vital contribution to

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<sup>8</sup> Werner Meissner, "China's Search for Cultural and National Identity from the Nineteenth Century to the Present," *China Perspectives* 2006, no. 68 (November 1, 2006): 41–54.

<sup>9</sup> Howard F. Stein, "Russian Nationalism and the Divided Soul of the Westernizers and Slavophiles," *Ethos* 4, no. 4 (1976): 407.

<sup>10</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Self and Other in International Relations Theory: Learning from Russian Civilizational Debates," *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 766.

<sup>11</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe / A Study in Identity and International Relations*, accessed March 30, 2018, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/books/e/9781317294702>, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Howard F. Stein, "Russian Nationalism and the Divided Soul of the Westernizers and Slavophiles," 405-406.

this process. To assert their importance in the modernization process, many intellectuals asserted that “modernization depends upon...the soft culture of thought enlightenment.”<sup>13</sup> Though Chinese and Russian intellectuals faced similar tensions with tradition in their respective cultural reappraisals, the intellectuals in China’s movement stand out in their desire to participate in the national vanguard.

The “Arab awakening” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also presents a contrast with China’s cultural reckoning. Intellectuals throughout the Arab world witnessed a powerful Europe that threatened their self-image. As in China, these intellectuals responded to the threat as a “cultural challenge.” In meeting the challenge they sometimes remained “defensive,” clinging to the idea that Islamic civilization was as good as modern Europe’s.<sup>14</sup> Other intellectuals, on the other hand, recognized that “progress...was a process of constant improvement of the human lot made possible not by the invocation of old ideas and values but by the application of human intelligence and will.”<sup>15</sup> Thus Islamic intellectuals shared *zhishifenzi*’s conflicting views towards tradition. But their attitude towards the future was different—a time of new threats that called upon new ideas to respond to successfully. *Zhishifenzi*, on the other hand, had a utopian view of the future and hoped to make whatever contribution to it that they could. But we should also note the ultimate result of the Islamic crisis. Rather than producing a culture with which to proceed with change, the idea of “pragmatism” seemed to emerge as a guiding principle. They abandoned Islamic law, but they also did not formulate other laws with which to replace it.<sup>16</sup> In China, *zhishifenzi* separated into different schools in their means of carrying out the modernization, adopting opposing views of which Chinese traditions to retain, but they all shared in a common excitement to radically transform China; with their “unadulterated utopianism,” intellectuals never viewed the future as a concrete reality already undergoing realization in the present but instead as a place where “conditions of possibility proliferated.”<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, China’s proliferation of possibility meant that it failed in the same way as Islam’s movement, its

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<sup>13</sup> Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Hisham Sharabi “Islam and Modernization in the Arab World,” *Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (1965): 22.

<sup>15</sup> Hisham Sharabi, “Islam and Modernization in the Arab World,” 22.

<sup>16</sup> Hisham Sharabi, “Islam and Modernization in the Arab World,” 24.

<sup>17</sup> Jing Wang, “High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China,” *Acls Humanities E-Book*, *Acls Humanities e-Book*, accessed March 30, 2018, 38.

indecisive thoughtfulness rendered insignificant by the unstoppable tide of pragmatic modernization. The distinctive traits of China's cultural crisis suggest the conditions that gave rise to it. While Russia and the Islamic world that started in the mid-nineteenth century witnessed a rising Europe that caused them to question themselves, China had already undergone such reckonings by the 1980s. Thus, rather than a harsh new awareness of a future of European domination, the 1980s movement occurred in a time of promise to undo such domination and restore already-damaged Chinese might. Hence the utopianism of the Chinese movement.

Japan's Meiji Restoration in 1868 marked the beginning Japan's rapid modernization and presents another illuminating contrast with China's cultural movement. Unlike in 1980s China, where all intellectuals accepted modernity as a necessity in the country's path forwards, in 19th century Japan modernity was just one component of the future, not its defining characteristic of it as it was in China. Japan saw modernity as "a foreign object, to be examined with circumspection and from all angles before decisions were made about whether and how it might be right for Japan." To determine which aspects of modernity to incorporate into Japan, "[t]here was considerable pragmatism." Starting in the 1870s government organized a "fact-finding mission" where leaders went around the world and found pieces of modernity to bring home. As with China's intellectuals, Japanese government leaders wanted to protect Japanese culture. In implementing modernity, the government emphasized the difference between modernization and westernization.<sup>18</sup> The top-down nature of Japan's cultural movement sets it apart from China's. The intellectuals it sent abroad, though expressing independent thought, all contributed to a single state-making project. Even the idea of keeping alive "Japanese Spirit" amid "Western Technology" was grounded less in nationalistic feeling and more in the knowledge that nationalism among the *population* would motivate the sacrifice needed for development.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, intellectuals in China acted with personal motivation and explored whatever intellectual corridors suited them. Where Japan reformulated its culture with the intent to determine concrete change to implement in the present, Chinese intellectuals contented themselves in the intellectual exercise of theorizing possibilities, which satisfied their urge to increase their societal positions but, as the government had not requested for them to do their

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Harding, "Meiji Modernist," *History Today* 67, no. 1 (January 2017): 30.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Harding, "Meiji Modernist," 31.

work, never had the opportunity to effect change. Thus Japan's cultural movement could produce real change, while China's remained mired in utopianism.

The Japanese, Russian, and Arab cultural movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries detailed above reveal the distinctive features of China's cultural reckoning. Characterizing all of the movements in our survey is the desire to achieve national strength. But the intellectuals of Arab, Japanese, and Russian movements lacked their utopianism and urge to cement their privileged positions in society. These distinct qualities reflect the view that had developed in China that modernization was the only path forward and the traditional position of intellectuals as part of the elite.

### **Three Waves of Modern Chinese Intellectual Movements**

The Culture Fever of the 1980s is by no means the first of its kind in the modern Chinese history. In fact, the debate of "the West versus the East" existed ever since China came into contact with the technologically superior Great Britain during the First Opium War (1839-1842). Initiated as a response to China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, the Hundred Days' of Reform, led by GuangXu Emperor, was attempted overhaul of Qing's political system.<sup>20</sup> The imperial reform included the removal of the formulaic "eight-legged essay" from the Civil Service Examination, a new ministry to oversee innovations in agriculture and technology, and the "Westernization" of the army.<sup>21</sup> Despite its abrupt end by Empress Dowager Cixi's coup d'état, the 1898 Reform was still considered a watershed moment in the intellectual history of China as it marked "the end of the era of separation between Chinese and barbarian and the coming of age of association among states."<sup>22</sup> More significantly, the Reform spurred the creation of independent literati clubs, journals, and academics by non-office-holding scholars.<sup>23</sup> The intellectuals' rejection of the traditional Sinocentric world-view and their efforts to incorporate the "new learning" of the West ushered in a new era in which literati outside of the officialdom demanded institutional change in a concerted effort.

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<sup>20</sup> Goldman, Merle, and Leo Lee. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Kwong, Luke S.K. 2000. "Chinese Politics at the Crossroads: Reflections on the Hundred Days Reform of 1898." *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 3: 663. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Goldman, and Lee. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. 17

<sup>23</sup> Karl, Rebecca E, Peter Gue Zarrow, Seungjoo Yoon, Tze-Ki Hon, Timothy B Weston, Richard Belsky, Joan Judge, Ying Hu, and Xiaobing Tang. 2002. *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China*. Harvard East Asian Monographs, 214. Cambridge, Mass.: Published by the Harvard University Asia Center.



Three years after the fall of Qing Dynasty, the New Culture Movement introduced a new round of intellectual debate in 1915, and ideas of “modernization” and “Westernization” made their debut in Chinese history. The complexity of this era was marked by its diversity of intellectual ideologies and later interpretations by different schools and parties. As illustrated by Rana Mitter, “the May Fourth period marked [...] a sense of real and impending crisis; a combination of a plurality of competing ideas aimed at “*saving the nation*”, and an audience ready to receive, welcome, contest, and adapt these ideas.”<sup>24</sup> Despite controversies surrounding many details in history and specific ideas, it is generally accepted that intellectuals were not satisfied with the cultural, social and economic status of China, and each proposed his own solution to “the crisis of modernity.”<sup>25</sup> They critically reflected on the progression of Chinese history and culture in order to “save the nation” by making the Chinese enlightened. The intellectuals commonly attacked the the Confucian “religion of rites” (*lijiao*), which the enlightened intellectuals saw as limiting the use of independent reasoning and perpetuating the prescribed and unchangeable rules of social-regime. To enlighten China meant to break such shackle by Westernizing and modernizing China. Cheng Duxiu, a key intellectual in the 1920s called on China’s youth to be “independent, progressive, aggressive.”<sup>26</sup> This is very similar to the Culture Fever that will be discussed in this paper, and as we will see, many arguments and theoretical justifications in 80s were borrowed from the New Culture Movement.

In 1966, Chairman Mao Zedong initiated “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)” to solidify his absolute authority and deter any revisionist tendency within the Party.<sup>27</sup> Though the Cultural Revolution was political in essence, it was nevertheless manifested in cultural terms as well. Most exemplary was Lin Biao’s call to “Smash the old way of thinking, the old culture, old custom, and old habits” at the August 18, 1966 “Great Meeting to Celebrate the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>28</sup> Such call represents the Mao’s attempt to establish a new Marxist-

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<sup>24</sup> Mitter, Rana, *A bitter Revolution: China’s Struggle with the Modern World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Fung, Edmund S. K. *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity : Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Fung, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Goldman, and Lee. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. 475

<sup>28</sup> 嚴家其, and 高舉. 1988. *The Ten-Year History of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: [Zhongguo "Wen Ge" Shi Nian Shi]*. First edition. China Study Series; Zhongguo Wen Ti Yan Jiu Cong Shu, No. 7 = No. 7. Teipei, Taiwan, R.O.C. (P.O. Box 14-19, Taipei, Taiwan): Institute of Current China Studies.

Leninist revolutionary trajectory of China that marks a complete breakaway from Confucianism, which was accused of fettering China's past. For the intellectuals, Mao's successive, intensifying campaigns against them demolished their elitist status and relegated them to the bottom of the society.

The Party's end of prosecution and loosened control of the intellectuals in Post-Mao era thus rendered the intellectual flourishing of the 1980s possible. As Leo Ou-Fan Lee and Merle Goldman assert, the New Culture Movement could be viewed as "a case of self-empowerment of a new group of educated elite who created a new self-image of their own importance precisely at the time when the traditional channels of political advancement were no longer available."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the genesis of 1980s Culture Fever is inextricably tied with the magnitude of repression that Chinese intellectuals endured during the Cultural Revolution. The sudden release from the repressive control of the Party during the turbulent ten years provided an impetus for the intellectuals to reclaim their elite status or simply to seek a more dignified position in a new society by exercising their intellectuality to provide theoretical means to the Chinese modernization. At the same time a new round of Enlightenment, very similar to the New Cultural movement, was initiated, but this time it was not "religion of rites", but Maoism which guides Chinese people for more than 30 years and Chinese Feudalism, that was under attack.

### **Magazine Reading (*Dushu*)**

First published on April 10, 1979 with a lead article titled "No Forbidden Zone in Reading," the magazine *Reading (Dushu)* gained much popularity among Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s. Receiving submissions from intellectuals of different schools of thought, *Reading* was known for its dense academic-style writing and its critical reviews on many translated Western works on humanities subjects, ranging from history, sociology, philosophy, to anthropology. It also needs to be noted that many Western works were introduced to Chinese intellectuals by *Reading*.<sup>30</sup> As Jing Wang, Professor of Chinese Language & Culture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, states in *High Culture Fever*, "Of particular importance were 1985 and 1986, two memorable years that witnessed the intensification of the intellectuals' methodology fever."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Goldman, and Lee. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. 4

<sup>30</sup> Davis, Edward L. 2005. *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*. London: Routledge.

<sup>31</sup> Wang Jing. 1996. *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 1

According to Jing, the initial setbacks in China's urban reform deepened intellectuals' urge to engage in cultural discussions about modernization. Consequently, I chose to focus on fifteen culture & modernization-related articles that are published in 1986's twelve *Reading* issues. Proclaiming their deserved responsibility to steer the direction of China's modernization, the intellectuals in those fifteen articles justified their duty by reducing the socio-economic crisis to a fundamentally cultural one. Therefore, in the 1980s, and especially 1986, the primary purpose of the intellectuals in examining Western thought and their own history was to better solve China's present-day predicaments. United by their common dream of a utopian future, the intellectuals demonstrate an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the West and more or less reached a consensus about the selective merger between the West and the East; however, by no means did they develop a clear, concrete action plan to bring modernization to fruition.

To begin with, the intellectuals in the selected fifteen articles took it as their birthright and duty to provide theoretical means to China's modernization. For example, in "Reflection on Cultures,"<sup>32</sup> the author Luo Zhufeng reviews two academic works, namely *Collection of Theories of Comparative Studies* and *Collection of Indian Culture Theories*, by Jin Kemu, a renowned historian and scholar of Comparative Studies. Supporting Jin's argument that cultures and traditions are not static and that both Chinese and Indian cultures are far from monolithic, Luo Zhufeng concludes that "the developmental trajectory of the era and advances in science should provide us with a better vantage point to perceive tradition in an unprecedented way; otherwise, we are not living up to the expectations of history." Phrases such as "a better vantage point" and "unprecedented way" illustrate that Luo Zhufeng, representative of many Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s, consciously sought to surpass his intellectual predecessors of the May Fourth Movement who had a characteristically simplistic perception of the polarity between the "West" and the "East." So how could the intellectuals avail themselves of this enhanced understanding of history? In "Intellectuals and Chinese Politics—Professor Zou Dang's Talk on 20th Century Chinese Politics II,"<sup>33</sup> Professor Zou Dang asserts that "In the long term, China's modernization depends on the intellectuals" because intellectuals alone have the capacity to

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<sup>32</sup> Luo Zhufeng. "Reflection on Cultures—Reading Jin Kemu's Two Books on Cultural Theories." (文化的反思—金克木先生的□部文化□集) *Reading (Dushu)*, December 1986, 3-13.

<sup>33</sup> Xue Yong. "Intellectuals and Chinese Politics—Professor Zou Dang's Talk on 20th Century Chinese Politics II 知□分子□中□政治—□□□授□二十世□中□政治之二." *Reading (Dushu)*, September 1986, 44-50.

provide theoretical justifications for Chinese Marxist Socialism or various other theories.” Similarly, *Reading*, as a magazine, is itself conscious of its vital role in history to bring about changes. In “Standing on the Forefront of Ideas of the Epoch—Reviewing the Magazine *Ideas in Contemporary Art*,”<sup>34</sup> the author Song Yaoliang opens up by posing a scenario where the revolution in the physics would have been postponed if no publication accepted Albert Einstein’s first paper. Further rationalizing the intellectuals’ historical responsibility, Song states, “Magazines with epochal responsibilities are the aegis of ideological trends.”

In the January issue of *Reading* alone, out of 40 magazine articles, 6 of them had the word “culture” in their titles. To justify their rightful position in the modernization process, the intellectuals in the selected articles either reduced socioeconomic issues, that is, a sense of inferiority in comparison to the West, to cultural ones, or they considered reforms on culture as an indispensable part of the modernization. Most explicitly, “Reflection on Culture” claims that “culture is the angle with which humans perceive, explain, and express the world...When a nation faces significant crisis or problems, it is, in fact, the culture to which the nation belongs that is in crisis.”<sup>35</sup> Wang Youqin’s “Cultural Reflections in the Modernization Process” starts off by defining modernization to be the coalescence of “the rebuilding of productivity, social structure, scientific level, and cultural values.”<sup>36</sup> Both rationalizations seek to secure intellectuals’ special status in China’s modernization process: if resolving the “cultural issue” is imperative to the nation’s development, then the Chinese intellectuals are the ones to resolve it.

Deeply aware of their justified historical duty to advance China’s modernization process, intellectuals in the selected works from *Reading* adopted a pragmatic approach towards both Western and Chinese literature. In fact, such practice could be traced back to the Chinese intellectuals in Hundred Days of Reform and the New Culture Movement. For example, in “Chen Duxiu and his *The Difference between Western and Eastern Civilizations*”, the author Huang Kejian clarifies the purposes of the intellectuals to study the West: “Just like the enlightenment during the Hundred Days of Reform, the New Culture Movement also compared

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<sup>34</sup> Song Yaoliang. “Standing on the Forefront of Ideas of the Epoch—Reviewing Magazine *Ideas in Contemporary Art* 立足于□代思潮的前言—□□《□代文□思潮》.” *Reading (Dushu)*, February 1986, 88-90.

<sup>35</sup> Luo Zhufeng. “Reflection on Cultures—Reading Jin Kemu’s Two Books on Cultural Theories.” (文化的反思—□金克木先生的□部文化□集)

<sup>36</sup> Wang Youqin. “Cultural Reflections in the Modernization Process □代化□程中的文化反思.” *Reading (Dushu)*, January 1986, 43-46.

Western and Eastern Cultures—seeing China from the perspective of the globe—so as to awaken and illuminate the people.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, in Liang Zhiping’s “The Rule of Law and its Modernization—A comparison of the Western and Eastern methodologies and *Major Contemporary Judicial Systems*,” the essential difference between Western and Eastern judicial system is unraveled as such: while Western civilizations regard law as the foundation of a society, Chinese civilization, with its heavy reliance on the so-called “ethical principles”, relegate law to a secondary position of being merely a tool.<sup>38</sup> In “Reflection on Culture”, the author Zhang Rulun analyzes the Jing Kemu’s objectives in his comparative studies undertaking: “The purpose of understanding the past is to solve the present-day predicaments. The examination of foreign countries is to help better understand China.

Despite their conspicuously pragmatic approach, the contributors displayed a demonstrably in-depth, nuanced understanding of the “West” and “East”. Chen Pingyuan’s “Culture·Root-Searching·Linguistic Code” is exemplary in its understanding of the complexities of cultures: “It is necessary to eradicate thinkings such as ‘to Sinicize’ or to ‘Westernize.’ Instead of regarding Western Culture and Chinese Culture as monoliths, we ought to see them as conglomerate of multiple molecules, possible to disintegrate, select, combine, or construct to bring a new Chinese Culture into being.”<sup>39</sup> Breaking away from his predecessors in the New Culture Movement, Chen Pingyuan’s remarks not only recognizes the diversity of cultures, but also champions a selective merger between Chinese and other Cultures. The Chinese intellectuals in selected articles roughly reached an agreement on such a mid-way approach to China’s cultural modernization. In “The Re-examination of Ancient Social History,” He Xin analyzes Gu Chun’s *Ancient Greek City State* and Ma Keyao’s *The Analysis of West European Economy Under Feudalism* to defeat a formulaic way to understand history. He Xin challenges certain scholars’ attempt to fit the Chinese history forcefully to the Western model: “from slavery, to feudalism, to capitalism, socialism” by resorting to a cultural relativist approach.

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<sup>37</sup> Huang Kejian. "Chen Duxiu and His *The Difference between Western and Eastern Civilizations* □□秀和他的《□西民族根本思想之差□》." *Reading (Dushu)*, March 1986, 43-49.

<sup>38</sup> Liang Zhiping 梁志平. "The Rule of Law and Its Modernization—A Comparison of the Western and Eastern Methodologies and Major Contemporary Judicial Systems 法制□□及其□代化—□西方法□念的比□□《□代主要法律体系》." *Reading (Dushu)*, February 1986, 3-10.

<sup>39</sup> Chen Pingyuan □平原. "Culture·Root-Searching·Linguistic Code 文化·□根·□□." *Reading (Dushu)*, January 1986, 40-43

Besides arguing that China does not fit into the Eurocentric concept of “feudalism”, He Xin cites African and Latin American models to defeat a set historical model of societal development.<sup>40</sup> He Xin’s refutation of using an Eurocentric, linear-progression historical model to examine China’s history demonstrates a rather refined, impartial understanding of history.

Despite such a nuanced understanding of different cultures and a near consensus on China’s modernization solution, a concrete action-plan eludes the intellectuals. With the exception of Liang Zhiping, who proposes to adopt a judicial system that is completely sovereign, other intellectuals fell short of coming up with detailed means to reach a commonly dreamed utopian future. For instance, Luo Zhufeng, in his “Explore New Avenues for Research in Chinese Cultural History—Reading *The Mysteries of Chinese Cultures I*”, contends that in order to make one’s national culture longlasting, the nation should rid itself of its dross, absorb the best, and make the best use of the advantages.”<sup>41</sup> As vague as the statement sounds, Luo Zhufeng is by no means alone in the 1980s academia, replete with vague, ambiguous slogans to modernize.

### **Three Representatives of Schools of Thoughts**

It has to be acknowledged that in the Eighties culture in all sectors underwent varied and diverse developments. It is therefore very hard to map out the entire cultural situation in that period in every detail—this would involve a huge amount effort in sorting out the historical archive. However, it is still possible to depict a general picture of the history by referring to some typical examples of different schools of thoughts. In fact, as early as in the 1987, one of the participants of the “High Cultural Fever,” Chen Lai published an article titled *Three Trends of Thought* (si xiang chu lu de san zhong dong xiang), in which he proposed three groups of intellectuals and their activity as the “cultural examples” of that time. These three separate groups of intellectuals include the members of the publishing committees of the book series “Marching toward the Future” led primarily by Jin Guantao, members of the book series “Culture: China and the World” led by Gan Yang and the China Academy of Culture. Chen Lai, in his short but informative article, concludes the three trends of thought were the scientism of

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<sup>40</sup> He, Xin. "The Re-examination of Ancient Social History 古代社□史的重新□□." *Reading (Dushu)*, November 1986, 40-51.

<sup>41</sup> Luo, Zhufeng. "Explore New Avenues for Researches in Chinese Cultural History—Reading *The Mysteries of Chinese Cultures I* □拓中□文化史的新途□—《中□文化之□》 (第一□) □后." *Reading (Dushu)*, September 1986, 37-41.

“Marching toward the Future,” the humanism of “Culture: China and the World” and the traditionalist view of the Academy. Chen Lai’s selection and description of the three trends were widely approved among the intellectuals participating in the Culture Fever. Gan Yang, the director of “Culture: China and the World,” described Lai’s article as “objectively and honestly introducing and analyzing some key aspects of the recent cultural discussion.” It is possible to reconstruct that period of history by analyzing these three trends that were at least agreed upon by the participants of 1980’s intellectual movement and to propose a narrative of the “Cultural Fever”. Through this narrative, we will then be able to see how these intellectual participants of the “Culture Fever” dealt with the modernization.

### 1. Marching toward the Future

The view of this school can be generally represented by the Ultrastability Theory of Chinese Society proposed by Jin Guantao, the chief editor of the book committee. There were several different versions of the written works explaining this theory, and among them *Behind the Representation of the History – an exploration of Chinese Ultrastability System of the Feudalism*, a book published as one of the first in the series that explains why feudalism survived in China for such a long time, was one of the most popular books at that time.<sup>42</sup>

The Ultrastability Theory was unique in that it boldly employs the method of System Theory (Informational Theory and Computational Theory) developed after the WWII in the analysis of the Chinese History. It processed Chinese history as if it is an ultrastable system in the realm of the natural sciences, and in this sense opened a new field in which methods of the natural sciences now invaded the social sciences.<sup>43</sup> Chen Lai argues that the attitude Jin had towards the social sciences exhibited a strong sense of the scientism. The theory seeks to answer one basic question, whose validity is not considered in the first place, namely “why did Chinese Feudalism stay in power for more than 2000 years?” By employing the System Theory, Jin explains this question by stating that the structure of feudalism has a strong stability. He divided the feudalistic China into three subsystem, i.e., Politics, Economy, and Culture (traditionally Confucianism) and the unity of the three systems provide a coherent system of the nation.

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<sup>42</sup> Jin Guantao and Liu qingfeng, *Behind the Representation of the History – an exploration of Chinese Ultrastability System of the Feudalism*, Sichuan People Publishing House, 1984

<sup>43</sup> Chen, *Three Thoughts*, 5

Furthermore, because of the brittleness (the inharmonic relationship among the subsystems lead to collapse) and some other features of the system, sudden increase of the unsystematic force in the system is not efficiently prevented, that is to say, cases like the growth of imperial power, or monetary deflation, would lead to a cyclical catastrophic breakdown in the society. But with this very breakdown, usually in a form of “peasant uprising,” the system regains the state of stability and returns to the prior state. The entire history then is sustained in feudalism in this cyclical unstableness and unity. Even though the system is flawed because it undergoes disastrous change from time to time, it does not necessarily have to improve and evolve itself due to the ultrastable structure.

But this theory doesn't seem very appealing in today's perspective. First, the validity of Jin Guantao's maneuver is not proved in the first place. The scope of application of System Theory and whether it can be extended to the study of history, especially Chinese history, or more generally whether applying a scientific theory to analyze issues of the social sciences is valid, are some of the challenges Jin is facing.

Second, as Jin Guantao himself said in an article looking back in 1988, the question that he was asking didn't stand up very well per se. There was a western-centrism ideology in his mind that drives to propose this kind of question: first, the very idea of feudalism is coined for the medieval political system in West Europe; second, in determining the longevity of the feudalism in China, Jin Guantao unconsciously compared it with the duration of the Western feudalism as his frame of reference. The whole question that the Ultrastability Theory serves to explain is essentially a product of the western-centrism.

## 2. “Culture: China and the World”

When talking about “Culture: China and the World,” people will usually first remember Gan Yang as the representative of this group of intellectuals. In Gan Yang's view, the greatest way to further cultivate our traditions is to be anti-traditional. This is an argument that is so contradict to our intuition that this narrative didn't receive the same popularity as that received by the Ultrastability Theory.

In Gan Yang's article in 1987, *Several Problems of the Cultural Discussion in the Eighties*, he argues that the key issue is not which culture is superior, Chinese or the Western, but that Chinese culture is “a traditional culture,” and the Western culture “a modernized



culture.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the comparison between China and the West was then transformed into the confrontation of the tradition and the modernized, which is also the judgment of the values of the backwardness and the advance. Chinese Culture in Yang Gao’s narrative became the critical reason why China was left behind in the course of modernization and denies that Chinese tradition has the continuity to be inherited. Therefore in order to create a modernized Chinese culture, China must criticize and rearrange the old traditional culture with a more modernized culture. He said in his article that the component and the key element of the new modernized culture should not be and could not be things like Confucianism which we have already had but something we will be getting one day. It is in this sense that Gan Yang and his book committee should be called “reformist”: To reform China with a new set of values. Yet even for Gan Yang himself, which modernized Culture system China should look to and depend on to initiate its own modernization was very unclear back then.

### 3. China Academy of Culture

One of the key figures of the China Academy of Culture, Li Zehou wrote in 1986 that the new cultural Enlightenment in China should not be radical criticism and a completely rejection of Chinese traditions or a wholesome westernization. But rather China should transform and recreate the traditions.<sup>45</sup>

In Li Zehou’s argument, he starts his narrative with the May Fourth Movement, and regards 1980s intellectual movement and “Cultural Fever” as a second May Fourth Movement. This kind of connection of the movement with May Fourth seems to provide a foundation for the entire cultural change in the 80s. Zehou Li first divides the May Fourth movement into two different sub-movements: one is New Culture movement, and the other Student Patriotic anti-Imperialist movement. He postulates that the dualism of the cultural enlightenment and the political salvation of the nation forms the conflict in the early twentieth century China. And in May Fourth, a unity between the two missions was reached: “cultural enlightenment spreads like a wildfire with the help of salvation movement; and the enlightenment in return provides the

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<sup>44</sup> Gan Yang, *Ba Shi Nian Dai Wen Hua Tao Lun De Ji Ge Wen Ti*, Culture: China and the World series, SDX Joint Publishing Company, volume 1, 1987

<sup>45</sup> Li Zehou, *Qi Meng Yu Jiu Wang De Shuang Chong Bian Zou*, Marching toward the Future, Sichuan People Publishing House, volume 1, 1986

salvation with thoughts, people and ranks.”<sup>46</sup> But soon such unity was overturned by the “situation of salvation, national interests and the poverty and suffering of the people.”<sup>47</sup> What enlightenment values, individual right and individual thoughts, became too trivial when facing the national emergency, and without a doubt was ignored and replaced by the “Feudalism” throughout the history all the way to the outburst Cultural Revolution.

But when we look at his story of May Fourth Movement and his argument of recreation of the tradition, it seems inevitable to reach a deadlock of contradiction. The Enlightenment from the west is a doubtless and absolute existence in the history and in his story these enlightenment values are accepted unconditionally as if they are the final scope of the value judgment of Chinese history. It almost exhibited a similar attitude which Gan Yang adapted, a point of view that is rooted on the western-centrism. Furthermore, there is so-called “Feudalism” that persists in Chinese history, either in the Social Revolution and Peasant Uprising or in the Marxism of CCP because of the failure of the Enlightenment. And all sudden, Li Zehou switched from criticizing “Feudalism,” which is part of the traditional values, into a neutral analysis of how to continually inherit our “traditional culture.” If “Feudalism” is bad in every sense, how can it be adapted into a modernized China? Therefore this narrative is flawed but reveals the struggle and inconsistent of the values in the 1980s

All documents of the three groups of intellectuals we have investigated happened to place the idea of “Culture” in a very important position. But the previously widely accepted Marxism History emphasizes more on how economic basis determines the superstructure, and culture doesn’t seem to fit into the general picture. Modernization Theory exactly provided a necessary environment for the invasion of culture into these three typical examples of cultural discussion.

If we suppose that the Modernization Theory influenced the progress of the Chinese modernization, then the features this theory has may frame significantly the cultural discussion. Latham summarized Modernization Theory having following characteristics: “1) ”Traditional” and “modernized” societies are separated by a sharp dichotomy; 2) economic, political and social changes are integrated and interdependent; 3) development tends to proceed toward the modern state along a common, linear path; and 4) the progress of developing societies can be

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<sup>46</sup> Li, 20

<sup>47</sup> Li, 21

dramatically accelerated through contact with developed ones.<sup>48</sup> The logic of linear scale of development to modernization and the arrogant of western-centrist modernization is more or less in agreement with the three articles previously.

But another important feature of the Modernization Theory is its stress on the importance of “culture” and “values system.” This arrangement certainly has its own need for an ideological narrative as Latham once argued that by contrasting the backwardness of the traditional society, the western countries wish to propagate the assumption that the strengths of the west are not natural resources, the military conquering or Capitalism exploitation of the classes, but the determining factor is the inherent culture deeply rooted in the western traditions. Regardless of the validity of this assumption, which is not the focus of this part, the idea that culture can determine the modernization, or culture has an important role, prevails in all three articles: the three subsystems including “Culture” as one of them, Gan Yang’s emphasis on the traditional side of culture, and Li Zehou’s consciousness of the Enlightenment, all somehow are presented in a common assumption that “Culture” will be the correct way to tackle the task of Chinese modernization. But whether modernization theory and modernization are sound was not examined as far as shown in the available sources.

It is clear that these three narratives of Chinese History are highly ideological if we take into consider the influence of modernization. But this ideological side of these intellectuals in the 80s was in agreement with the national demand of a modernization reformation. This was not only the demand of the general public or the intellectuals, but also the superstructure proposal of the CCP. These narratives, from different perspectives, the scientism, the reformist, and the China Academy, tells three distinct but ideologically highly congruent stories of history: that China at any sense is weaker than the West and the primary remedy should be found in the division of Culture. This general agenda of the stories which they took for granted but in fact is flawed embodied an agreement on the necessity and the justice of the modernization, and in return, these stories were written to provide a theoretical foundation and more importantly a justification for the modernization. The problem back then was not “do we need modernization” but “why we need modernization,” and in the intellectual sector, everyone was working on this one direction.

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<sup>48</sup> Latham, M.E.. *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “National Building” in the Kennedy Era.*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp 14

### Movie *Red Sorghum* (红高粱 *Honggaoliang*)

On February 23, 1988, *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear, the highest prize, at the 38<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. As the first international grand award winner in Chinese film history, it set a milestone that marked the emergence of world attention to Chinese films. In an interview, director Zhang Yimou recalled his ecstasy: “My feeling at that moment was, ‘the entire Chinese nation is standing up proudly.’”<sup>49</sup> On the heels of this unprecedented fame and honor, *Red Sorghum* was quickly screened in China and achieved extraordinary commercial success: the thirty-cent tickets were raised to fifteen yuan. Significantly, in October, it premiered in the U.S., becoming the first Chinese movie screened in American cinemas after the Cultural Revolution.

*Red Sorghum*<sup>50</sup> displays the robustly primitive life in the rural areas of Shandong province in the 1930s. The story unfolds under the narration of the protagonists’ grandson about their meeting and unconventional life. The narrator's grandmother is a poor young woman forced to marry an old man with leprosy who owns a crude distillery of sorghum wine, and his grandfather (not the man she originally married), one of the carriers of her sedan chair on the wedding day, kills the bandit who tries to steal the grandmother away. After the rescue, an implicit sense of romance develops between the grandmother and her rescuer. A few days later, the grandfather stops the grandmother and chases her into a large field of wild sorghum, where they boldly fornicate, discarding the restraints of traditions and conservative moral standards. The grandmother’s husband, the owner of the distillery, dies soon after, and the grandmother takes charge. On the day of the Wine Festival, the distillery produces its first batch of sorghum wine, the grandfather pulls a prank by urinating into the wine. Fortuitously, the wine tastes better than ever. Nine years later, Japanese troops atrociously invade the village and kill the revolutionary, Luohan, who previously works at the distillery, by brutally skinning him alive. To avenge Luohan’s death, the grandparents and distillery workers decide to blow up the Japanese military vehicles. In the end, the grandmother is killed by the Japanese machine guns. Only the

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<sup>49</sup> "Red Sorghum Behind the Scenes." Douban Movies. December 12, 2012. Accessed March 27, 2018. <https://movie.douban.com/review/5695734/>.

<sup>50</sup> □高粱: *Red Sorghum*. Directed by Zhang Yimou. Performed by Gong Li and Jiang Wen. China: Xi'an Dian Ying Zhi Pian Chang, 1988.

grandfather and his nine-year-old son, the narrator's father, survive. With the boy singing folk songs, they bid farewell to the grandmother.

In contrast to many dramatic films, the plot initially appears disjointed, especially with the sudden shift to the Japanese invasion; however, because the first half depicts unrestrained nature and the primitive energy of life—just like the wild sorghum—and the second half illustrates a dauntless attitude towards death,<sup>51</sup> its theme is inherently unified. A carefree sense of freedom is emphasized throughout the film with the bold usage of red—the red wedding dress and sedan, red sorghum wine, and the striking red blood of the revolutionary and others killed by the Japanese troops. Moreover, there is no sign of the government in the movie. Since local power is concentrated in the hands of bandits, revenge and death are common, and the areas surrounding the wild sorghum field exists in a state of anarchy. Even the distillery workers' fight against the Japanese is a spontaneous grass-roots uprising, separate from any government intervention. Notably, the fetters on freedom of expression in filmmaking remained prevalent when *Red Sorghum* was made, due to the repercussions of the propaganda films during the Cultural Revolution, which created the lingering fear that severe sanctions would occur if a film revealed dark and negative image of China.<sup>52</sup> Through depiction of the grandparents' unrestrained love and the workers' anarchic battle, the filmmaker managed to present a window into the primitive freedom in 1930s while creating under the limitations of censorship in mid-1980s. The pristine enthusiasm in search of freedom, both within and outside of the movie, won the western judges over.

However, the domestic enthusiasm for *Red Sorghum* didn't last long. Some skeptical voices questioned the western judges' motive for rewarding a movie that displays the backwardness, brutality and ignorance of Chinese rural areas in the 1930s, which are evident in scenes like the arranged marriage of the grandmother, the archaic production mode in the rural wine distillery, and the villagers' powerlessness when facing the Japanese invasion. In *China Film News*, a critic fiercely decried the Western acclaim: "*Red Sorghum* vilifies, belittles and

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<sup>51</sup> Tan, Haozhe. "The Interpretation of Red Sorghum: Aspiration and Reflection." *Movie Review*, 1988, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Shao, Mujun. "Chinese Films Amidst the Tide of Reform." *East-West Film Journal* 1, no. 1 (December 1986): 59-68.

humiliates the Chinese people...it could only win the appreciation of foreigners.”<sup>53</sup> Amidst the tide of reform and economic development, some audiences were expecting that a positive, modernized image of China could be delivered to the world, especially Western countries. The depiction of Chinese traditions was catering to the Westerners’ curious gaze, tinged with an air of superiority. Additionally, from these critics’ point of view, winning the Golden Bear was the main reason that *Red Sorghum* was extolled domestically. Therefore, the Chinese audiences’ enthusiasm was seen as a fad that prioritized and followed Western judgements, which demonstrated their lack of cultural independence and dignity.

Chen Haosu, the deputy minister of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television at the time, representing the official viewpoints, responded on *Wenhui Daily* and *Yangcheng Evening News*, aiming to mitigate the accusations against *Red Sorghum* supporters. In the section subtitled *Does Exposure of Poverty and Backwardness Makes It a Film That Humiliates China?*<sup>54</sup>, he justified the film’s depiction by acknowledging “*Red Sorghum* can’t avoid the fact of backwardness and poverty since it has chosen the Second Sino-Japan War era as its historical background.”<sup>55</sup> He noted that its portrayal of people’s life was rather truthful, without over-emphasizing the underdevelopment of rural areas. In his opinion, as opposed to depreciating China’s image, the film eulogized the Chinese people’s brave and outright pursuit of happiness and freedom, their perseverance against invasion, as well as the willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Moreover, he emphasized that “a great advantage of *Red Sorghum* is that it doesn’t have any sense of Confucianism...our nation is deeply affected by traditional Confucianism, so we tend to be spiritually conservative...and not accustomed to fervent and unrestrained love.”<sup>56</sup> As an official in the media administration, he explicitly negated Confucianism and called for a more open-minded reception from the film's critics. Chen’s response represented an anti-traditional perspective that suggested audiences reflect on the past and appreciate the movie’s artistic values with a modernized mindset.

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<sup>53</sup> Zhang, Ying, and Ke Ping. "Why Do We Criticize Zhang Yimou-- the History of the Criticisms about Zhang Yimou." January 14, 2010. Accessed March 27, 2018. <http://www.infzm.com/content/40053/0>.

<sup>54</sup> Haosu, Chen. "Discussion About Red Sorghum." In *Lun Zhang Yimou*, 147–57. 北京: 中□□影出版社, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Haosu, Chen. "Discussion About Red Sorghum." In *Lun Zhang Yimou*, 154. 北京: 中□□影出版社, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> Haosu, Chen. "Discussion About Red Sorghum." In *Lun Zhang Yimou*, 152. 北京: 中□□影出版社, 1994.

Apart from the mainstream criticism and defense of *Red Sorghum*, Xie Xuanjun brought forward a different reason for its western acclaim. He ascribed the film's success to "a westernized spirit—modernism"<sup>57</sup>, pointing out that both sides of the debate mentioned above had over-emphasized "national characteristics"—these traditional elements, such as folk songs and local customs, that ostensibly portrayed the uniqueness of the Chinese. Yet the film had adopted a westernized narrative in its depiction of freedom and resistance to traditional norms, which was the fundamental reason that brought it to the stage of Berlin Film Festival. Had it unfolded according to a traditional Chinese narrative, it would have been impossible for the narrator to reveal the private stories of his grandparents, and the grandmother would be regarded as a dissolute woman rather than a liberated and empowered figure. The glorification of the grandmother affirmed the "Western standard" within the movie, which further reflected a general infiltration of Western culture at the time. The reality that the filmmakers and critics ascribed the film's success to its distinct Chinese characteristics yet failed to recognize the "Western narrative" that the film actually employed serves as evidence of this infiltration.

The debates over *Red Sorghum* indicated Chinese people's ambivalence about their cultural identity during the Culture Fever of the 1980s. They were proud when the Chinese characteristics that symbolized their national identity were acknowledged by the Westerners, but at the same time they were desperate to eliminate their sense of inferiority within a Western-dominant cultural atmosphere. For many critics, celebrating *Red Sorghum*'s grand prize meant fawning over "Western tastes". They tried to declare the Chinese people's own individuality by negating the prestige of Western aesthetic standards. However, this individuality was inevitably comprised of traditions which they were willing to abandon, and some portions of the Western standards were advocated, such as freedom and a less conservative mindset. They were seeking a modern yet non-Western cultural identity, and this process was paradoxical, which made them feel lost. As Wang Yichuan argued: "*Red Sorghum* is the result of our current cultural conflict between rationality and fanaticism within the Chinese culture, and fanaticism has its victory,"<sup>58</sup> since the protagonists in the film embodied an unrestrained and disobedient lifestyle. Similar fanaticism had appeared in the May Fourth Movement, and there had been an extreme

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<sup>57</sup> Xie, Xuanjun. *Collection of Essays on China: 1988-1989 (1988 -1989)*. LULU COM, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Wang, Yichuan. "The Struggle for Existence in the Sense of Lost-- *Red Sorghum* and the Chinese Ideology" In *Lun Zhang Yimou*, 127. 北京: 中□□影出版社, 1994.

version during the Cultural Revolution. Such fanaticism seemed to be bonded with total negation of the traditional ideologies, but it was more complicated during the Culture Fever when people needed a modernized but also distinctively Chinese cultural identity. *Red Sorghum* functioned as a mirror that reflected the ambivalent ideological atmosphere of the Culture Fever, which matched the sentiment in Cui Jian's song mentioned at the very beginning of this paper—the feeling of “possessing nothing”.

“People feeling lost tend to blame rationality and deprecate the symbols of Chinese cultural traditions—the old dragon, the Yellow River, and the Great Wall.”<sup>59</sup> Indeed, soon after the heated discussions over *Red Sorghum*, the documentary *River Elegy* was aired, which criticized the Chinese civilization which had emerged from the Yellow River, and later propelled the Tiananmen Square Movement.

### **Television Documentary Series *River Elegy* (河殇 *Heshang*)**

In the meantime, while the intellectuals engaged in the “Cultural Fever” in a fairly scholastic manner, intense discussion regarding the culture was also happening in the general public led by the radical and influential television documentary series, *River Elegy (Heshang)*. While the elite literature and magazine *Reading* reveal how intellectuals, aware of the nuances of the Western and Chinese cultures, constructed metaphysical, sophisticated frameworks to rationalize their own visions of modernization, *River Elegy*, whose main audience is the general public, reflects a rather unrefined dichotomy of the West and the East and an advocacy of a complete abandonment of the Chinese traditions.

Dr. Jiayan Mi, Associate Professor of English and World Languages & Cultures in College of New Jersey, argues that “the year 1988 will most likely be remembered for one single event in modern Chinese socio-cultural history: the “Heshang phenomenon.”<sup>60</sup> *Heshang* 河殇, or *River Elegy*, is a six-episode documentary produced by Su Xiaokang 苏晓康 and Wang Luxiang 王鲁湘 and aired on China Central Television (CCTV) that attributes the decline and current backwardness of the Chinese Civilization to the Yellow River, particularly its contributions to

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<sup>59</sup> Wang, Yichuan. "The Struggle for Existence in the Sense of Lost-- Red Sorghum and the Chinese Ideology", 128.

<sup>60</sup> Jiayan Mi (2005) The Visual Imagined Communities: Media State, Virtual Citizenship and Television in *Heshang (River Elegy)*, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 22:4, 327-340, DOI: 10.1080/10509200590475805



the genesis of an isolationist, conservative, and highly centralized Confucian culture; therefore, the stagnant, stifling Confucian traditions, according to *River Elegy*, must give place to the dynamic, modern, and democratic Oceanic Western culture in order to reinvigorate China. By evaluating the portrayal of Confucianism in *River Elegy*, this essay argues that debates surrounding Confucian values vis-à-vis the perceived Western superiority are not only relevant today but also integral to the formation of a new modern Chinese identity. By evaluating the portrayal of Confucianism in *River Elegy*, this essay argues that debates surrounding Confucian values vis-à-vis the perceived Western superiority are not only relevant today but also integral to the formation of a new modern Chinese identity.

One of the overarching objectives of *River Elegy* is to account for the decline of Chinese civilization and the rise of the West. However, having examined the complexities of intellectual discourses in 1980s literature and magazine *Reading*, *River Elegy*'s account of the dualism of the West and the East seems to align with that of the New Culture Movement, who oversimplified history and treated the West and East as monoliths. *River Elegy* argues that "Westerners examined astronomy, anatomy, physics, and chemistry; in contrast, the Chinese studied books, words, and archaic writings. Therefore, Hu Shi commented, 'Chinese humanities created more knowledge in books, while Western natural sciences ushered in a new world.'" The quotation is indicative of *River Elegy*'s typical denigration of Chinese traditional cultures. It implies that the intellectual works by Confucius scholars are more or less devoid of any utilitarian values compared to those by Western scholars. However, in Zi Zhongyun's "Predicaments of Chinese intellectuals", published in a liberal and reformist Chinese magazine entitled *China Through the Ages* in September 2010, the dichotomy between traditional Chinese and Western academic focuses is presented in a more balanced way: "The development of traditional Chinese philosophies coincided with that of ancient Greece. While the West emphasized reasons, logic, natural sciences, which contributed to its development in science and productivity, Chinese philosophy centered on ethics and politics, self-cultivation for serving the country, which led to the flowering of political culture and human relationships."<sup>61</sup> Similarly Ying-shih Yu, a reputed historian and sinologist, also drew the distinction between traditional Chinese and Western

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<sup>61</sup> Zi, Zhongyun 卞中筠. "Predicaments of Chinese intellectuals 知识分子道口的承口失落." *China Through the Ages* 炎口春秋, Sept. 2010.

scholars. According to him, Neo-Confucian scholars such as Wang Yangming believed that Gewu 格物(investigation of things), the Confucius' approach to learning, only refers to "things within our mind". However, it was not until their contact with Western sciences, initially promulgated by Jesuit missionaries, that Confucian scholars extend the realm of "things" to the external and natural world.<sup>62</sup>

In the culminating episode, *River Elogy* states the following in its usual indignantly righteous tone: "Confucianism's status as the sole, dominant state ideology reinforces the unity of the Yellow civilization. Confucian beliefs represent the habitual practices and ideal conditions of a landlocked civilization, and its existence is quite reasonable during the heyday of the oriental feudalism. However, the monotonous ideological unity prevents diverse development and the advent of oceanic elements." Confucianism acts as a stifling force in Chinese history for its homogeneity fostered a culture of conservatism and close-mindedness, thus barring desirable values such as adventurousness and democracy. In contrast, Ying-shih Yu's "Confucianism and China's Encounter with the West in Historical Perspective" shows that, contrary to conventional wisdom, early Confucian scholars were quite open to foreign influence. For example, without a culture of receptivity, Buddhism would never have been accepted and popularized in China, the religious syncretism of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism during Ming dynasty would be impossible, and Eighteenth-century Confucians such as Ji Yun 纪昀 would not have openly expressed their great admiration for Western science. Additionally, the earliest Chinese advocates of democracy in the late nineteenth century were none other than Confucians. Inspired by Wang Tao's writing, Kang Youwei 康有为 found Western democracy comparable to the political culture in the Golden Age of Yao and Shun, which epitomized Chinese intellectuals' naturalization of Western ideas through a distinctively Confucian lens before their vehement rejection of Confucianism during the May Fourth Movement in 1919.

Third, *River Elogy* accuses the Confucian hierarchical society of being inherently corrupting and Confucius scholars of being obsequious to the political establishment. *River Elogy* argues that the absolute devotion to emperors, sages, elderlies, and ancestors causes the gradual erosion of the system. For example, a bureaucratic system made of Confucius scholar-

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<sup>62</sup> Yü, Ying-shih. *Chinese History and Culture: Seventeenth Century Through Twentieth Century*. Edited by Josephine Chiu-Duke and Michael S. Duke, NEW YORK, Columbia University Press, 2016. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/yu--17860](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/yu--17860).

officials have a tendency to corruption because of the erosive nature of power and their subservient nature: “History brought China a distinctive group of people—the intellectuals. They hardly have any unified economic interests or independent political stances as they are attachments [to the political establishments] for thousands of years... Their intellect could be manipulated, their will be distorted, their spinal chords bent, and their body obliterated.” In contrast, Zi Zhongjun presents a drastically different depiction of the Chinese intellectuals. Rather than being dependent and blindly following the orders of the political superiors, Chinese intellectuals, in Zi’s view, embodied the following virtues: public spiritedness, integrity, righteousness, and loyalty to the emperor. Due to political turmoils, Chinese intellectuals, since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, are forced to display their absolute loyalty to the political system in an unquestioned fashion. However, for the most part of the intellectual history in China, Confucian scholars are acclaimed by Zi for their commitment to academic independence and a strong sense of civic duty, regardless of their official governmental positions. Therefore, *River Elegy* is mistaken in its belief of a static nature of Confucian scholars who have been parasitical and sycophantic throughout history.

The Heshang phenomenon coincided with a period of “culture fever” in the 1980s, termed by Ying-shih Yu: Chinese intellectuals, inundated by the sudden import of Western ideas such as democracy, freedom, and Modernization theory, displayed “a passionate and unbounded faith in democracy as a panacea for all of China’s troubles.”<sup>63</sup> Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang were clearly influenced by such prevailing embrace of Western values of the Chinese intellectuals. What is problematic about *River Elegy* is that in Su and Wang’s portrayal, Confucianism and Western ideas are incompatibly antithetical; therefore, China’s acceptance of Western ideals have to come at the expense of total abandonment of the Confucian elements, whose rhetoric is reminiscent of that during The May Fourth Movement. Indeed, the questions regarding the compatibility of Chinese and Western belief systems have been constantly sought after by Chinese intellectuals. For example, in Hu Shi 胡适’s introduction to *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China*, he writes, “How can we best assimilate modern civilization in such a manner as to make it congenial and congruous and continuous with the civilization of our own making?” Here Hu Shi seeks to modernize China while retaining the core

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<sup>63</sup> Ying-shih Yu, 261.

values of the Sinic Civilization, thus taking a different path from Su and Xiao's total assimilation into the Western "Oceanic" civilization. Indeed, the predominant view of Confucian scholars preceding the May Fourth Movement was that many Western values, such as democracy, consent of the governed, and emphasis on science, could be found in China's Golden Age as described in Confucian classics. For example, Wang Tao 王濤(1828-1897), the famous Chinese assistant to Scottish sinologist and missionary James Legge, wrote down the following observation while in England: "The real strength of England, however, lies in the fact that there is a sympathetic understanding between the governing and the governed, a close relationship between the ruler and the people...the daily domestic political life of England actually embodies the traditional ideals of our ancient Golden Age." Similarly, Qian Daxin 钱大昕 (1728-1804), in his praise of Western technological superiority, commented, "In ancient times, no one could be a Confucian who did not know mathematics...Chinese methods [now] lag behind Europe's because Confucians do not know mathematics."<sup>64</sup> Therefore, these scholars contend that some core Western values are actually indigenous to Confucianism.

*River Elegy* further maintains that while scientific developments and modernization can somehow work in landlocked Asiatic civilizations, science alone cannot revive the entire civilization. Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang suggest that a complete revitalization of China must come with ideological reconstruction and embrace of Oceanic values such as democracy and the rule of law. After the crackdown of the Tiananmen Square Student Demonstrations in June of 1989, *River Elegy* was officially condemned by the Communist Party of China (CCP) for fueling pro-democratic and anti-government sentiments. While the party pursued a policy of decentralization and deregulation of culture in the 1980s, which enabled the airing of *River Elegy*, substantial change ensued after Jiang Zemin's declaration to "promote the excellent tradition of national culture" at the Sixteenth National Congress of CCP.<sup>65</sup> As the party reassumed its control over political, economic, and cultural life of the Chinese people, Shufang Wu, argued in *Journal of Contemporary China* in 2014 that "CCP government has tried to adopt Confucianism as a complement of its ideological tool to secure its cultural leadership." In Wu's

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<sup>64</sup> Yü, Ying-shih. 264

<sup>65</sup> Wu, Shufang. "The Revival of Confucianism and the CCP's Struggle for Cultural Leadership: A Content Analysis of the People's Daily, 2000–2009." *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 23, no. 89, Sept. 2014, pp. 971-991. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/10670564.2014.882624.

analysis of *People's Daily*, CCP's official organ, issued from 2000 to 2009, she found that Confucianism appeared in 228 articles, with only one single instance of negativity. Confucianism was frequently lauded by *People's daily* for its values such as "harmony", "credibility", "collective over individuals" and "national spirit", which are all conducive to societal stability. Wu observed that while certain Confucian values are officially promulgated, others are selectively abandoned, all dependent on the needs and political strategies of the CCP. Therefore, CCP's determination to revitalize China by adopting a Laissez-faire economic approach while adhering to its Confucian past contradicts Su and Wang's admonitions in *River Elegy*. Nevertheless, *River Elegy's* prediction is justified, at least based on Yu Hua's characterization of contemporary China. In his *China in Ten Words*, Yu Hua, though acknowledging the tremendous economic growth in the past two decades, comments that such growth arrived in tandem with societal perversion. The lopsided development, namely unfettered economic activities and highly concentrated political power, provoked confusion in people's value systems, which led to the genesis of copycat, bamboozle, and various other sharp social contradictions.<sup>66</sup>

"To save the Chinese nation, we must expel the foreign invaders. However, to rejuvenate the civilization, we must re-open our gates to accept the lights of science and democracy." Such a seemingly paradoxical state of angst is what defines the contemporary Chinese identity. The question "how do we reconcile with our Chinese traditional identity in the milieu of this modern, increasingly westernized world?" permeates in many Contemporary Chinese works. In Pai Hsien-yung's *Taipei People*, the physical relocation of mainlanders to Taiwan and the declining status of traditional values greatly foster a sense of displacement and anxiety, shared by people in myriad walks of life. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* illustrates the struggles of second-generation Chinese Americans to live with both their Chinese and American identity; though the Jing-Mei Woo, in the end, seems to be able to accept her dual cultural heritage, such realization comes perfunctorily and unjustifiably. In Han Han's *This Generation*, a collection of his blog pieces from 2007-2011, he seems to be frustrated by China's conservatism, nationalism, rigidity, disregard of basic human rights, which is diametrically opposed to Western world's openness, democracy, and equality. Despite his penetrating awareness of Western cultural superiority, Han refuses to forsake his Chinese identity, thus echoing James Baldwin's words, "I love America

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<sup>66</sup> Yu Hua. *China in Ten Words*. Translated by Allan Barr, Anchor Books, 2011.

more than any other country in this world, and, exactly, for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” In Yu Hua’s *China in Ten Words*, Chinese people’s perception of US superiority and their copycatting of US products are numerous mentioned; meanwhile, the populace still looks to the past and fantasize about the rebirth of Mao Zedong to revitalize China. In conclusion, the poignant tension between selective adoption of desirable Western values and the urgent nationalist call to retain our traditional Confucian core cultivates a new Chinese identity. Such tension and conflict are not only perceived by intellectuals but also felt acutely by common people who are trying to make sense of their position in this increasingly interconnected world.

### **Conclusion**

The Cultural Fever in the 1980s was spurred by the traumatic experiences during the ten years of Cultural Revolution and the sudden awareness of the economic and technological superiority of the West. Self-aware of their proclaimed historical duty to play a vital role in China’s modernization process, the intellectuals of different schools were united unintentionally under this shared vision of utopian future to provide rationalizations for cultural changes. Even though the intellectuals in the 1980s have a demonstrably nuanced understanding of the “West” and the “East”, thus struggling between the traditional Chinese values and the Western ideas, they nevertheless fell short of devising a definite action plan for the modernization of China. History has made an ironic turn at the culminating years of the 1980s: while the cultural discussions in the intellectual realm have been characteristically ideological and rational, *River Elegy*’s simplistic presentation of the West and the East as a binary radicalized the discussion and eventually escalated the situation to an unexpected level. With Hu Yaobang’s unexpected decease as the catalyst, students, who became growingly discontent with the governmental corruption and lack of political reform, took up to the streets and Tiananmen Square to express their frustration and uncertainty. After the clampdown of the student protest by the People’s Liberation Army, CCP’s conservative force re-took the political helm. While the economy kept growing at a breakneck speed, largely boosting the national morale, political reform has been de facto stagnant ever since. Ironically, with the state-initiated revival of Confucianism and an unprecedented level of economic prosperity, Chinese people’s spiritual vacuum seems to be at an all time low. Which Western values should we emulate and what traditional values should we abandon? Such a valuable question hotly debated in the “Culture Fever” lost its charm in

contemporary China, and the majority of the people at large seem to be in a state of insouciance. Why do we need to bother thinking about those when the “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” is functioning so well. Together with the reclining status of independent intellectuals, the cultural discussions in the 1980s seem to lose its relevance today all together...

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