



The rise of cultural nationalism in contemporary china: the main content and causes

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to explore the rise of cultural nationalism in Contemporary China. For most of the previous century, traditional culture had been widely condemned as “impediments to China’s development” and therefore needed to be uprooted. However, since the 1990s, the traditional culture has experienced an unprecedented resurgence and the cultural nostalgia (later defined as cultural nationalism) quickly ascended as one of the most powerful ideological trends among the contemporary Chinese society. This article seeks to discover what caused such a dramatic shift. It starts with a brief historical background for the emergence of the current cultural nationalism, and then moves on to explain its two main ideological themes: “anti-Marxism” and “anti-Western” by examining representative works. It explores the economic, social cultural and political causes for the rise of cultural nationalism by drawing Primordialism, Modernism and Huntington’s theory concerning “modernization and cultural resurgence” in non-Western societies.

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Introduction

For the most part of the last century, from May 4th movement in 1919 to the June 4th movement in 1989, the Chinese tradition was considered as the roots of China’s backwardness and hence needed to be totally eradicated. Only about 20 years ago, “regenerating traditional Chinese culture” was raised by a small group of Chinese intellectuals. And within only 10 years of the new century, the cultural nationalism has rapidly risen as one of the most powerful ideological trends in contemporary China particularly among the middle class (Xiao 2008:327). What, then, is the Chinese cultural nationalism mainly about? And what has attributed to the rise of the cultural nationalism?

First of all, it is necessary to clearly define the term, “cultural nationalism”. “Nationalism”, in social science, is notoriously difficult to define as it actually covers a lot of interrelated phenomena. As Arthur N. Waldron (1985:416) complained, “capturing nationalism in a theory has proved to a difficult task”. Peter Alter (1994:1) described nationalism as “one of the most ambiguous concepts in the present-day vocabulary of political and analytical thought”. And the same is true with cultural nationalism. Given the complexities of the term “nationalism”, for the clarity of the research, “cultural nationalism” in this study is narrowly defined as the ideological movement that aims at reviving the ‘traditional culture’ and making it as the basis of national identity building.

Historical Background: the Role of Traditional Culture in Modern Chinese Nationalism

“Traditional culture” here mainly refers to the dominant culture in ancient China (roughly 2000 B.C. -1840 A.D.). And *culture* here means a common symbolic system such as national language, religions, customs, social values, and philosophy, etc, all of which are regarded as an outgrowth of unique national history. “Culture” is endowed with the symbolic power of what Durkheim calls *logical conformism*, that is, “a homogeneous conception of time, space, number and cause, one which makes

it possible for different people to reach agreement or consensus on the immediate meaning of the world” (Bourdieu 1991:166). It also can be seen as the “*cultural fictions*” that Anderson believed the “imagined communities” rest upon (Anderson 1991). Traditional culture has a very negative role in the modern Chinese nationalism. For example, both the New Cultural Movement of 1916-1919 and May 4th Movement in 1919, which have exerted profound impact on modern Chinese nationalism, were anti-traditionalist, viewing the tradition as the roots of China’s backwardness and hence needed to be eradicated or uprooted (Zhao 2004). Both of them imported the Western ideology, be it liberal or socialist, to transform and replace the old traditional culture.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the socialist anti-traditionalism has risen to the official ideology which warranted CCP’s rule (Zheng 1999; Zhao 2004; Guo 2004). And the ill fate of the traditional culture reached its climax during the “Cultural Revolution” in the 1970s.

Even after the opening and reforming policies in 1978, the role of tradition in Chinese nationalism, however, still remained negative. During the 1980s, there was a strong anti-traditional liberalism current surging over the Chinese intelligentsia and some of the political leaders which resulted in the June-4th movement (Zheng 1999; Zhao 2004; Ye 2004). Zhao (2004) explained that the liberalists’ real intention was to attack the communist government and the “anti-tradition” was just a discursive excuse.

The Rise of the Cultural Nationalism and Its Main Themes

Interestingly, the fate of the Chinese traditions had experienced a dramatic twist since the June-4th political crisis. During the 1990s, there was a fever of Chinese/Confucius learning (*Guo xue re*) among the Chinese intelligentsia (Zheng, 1999; Zhao, 2004; Guo, 2004). The tradition which used to be considered as backward and needed to be eradicated or reformed, this time, was reinterpreted and worshipped as embodying great wisdom and even adopted to fight against the

western ideological aggression in the “clashes of civilizations” (Barne, 1995; Xu, 2001; Guo, 2004; Zheng 1999; Zhao, 2004). Barne (1995) offered a vivid and authoritative description of the rising cultural nationalism especially among the Chinese intelligentsia during this period of time.

There were two basic themes in the cultural nationalism tide: anti-Marxism and anti-West especially anti-US. In fact, cultural nationalists during this period of time fought both the communism and Western ideology for the purpose of regenerating traditional culture.

The Anti-Marxism Cultural Nationalism

The anti-Marxism theme was reflected in academic discourses in historical and Confucian studies. In the historical studies, some historians tried to reinterpret the Chinese history through the evolutionary paradigm, a basic character of the traditional Confucian perspective, rather than the old revolutionary paradigm of the Marxism. The paradigmatic shift was best shown in the debate about Zeng Guofan, a Confucian-styled high official in late Qing dynasty who suppressed the peasants' rebellion (Tai ping Rebellion). The Marxist historians condemned him as a reactive cold-blooded killer as he subjugated the peasants who symbolized the “progressive force in history”. However, the so-called orthodox view based on Marxist revolutionary paradigm incurred frontal attacks from the cultural nationalist historians who insisted that Zeng should be a highly respectable Confucian who has made great contributions to the Chinese culture as the rebels he repressed sabotaged not only the social stability but also Confucian culture. And the new interpretation immediately gained approval from most other historians and also received great popularity among common Chinese people (Guo 2004).

In the Confucian studies area, there was a sudden outburst of Confucian fever among the academicians and a rapid rise of the New Confucianists in mainland China. These New Confucianists, represented by Jiang Qing, Luo Yijun and Chen Kejian, have written extensive academic discourses to promote their aim—reconstructing a Confucian Chinese nation. They argued that the most serious problem for China today was not economic backwardness or lack of political democracy, but the dissipation of national spirit and loss of spiritual anchorage for the whole nation. The spirit, in their eyes, was Confucianism. They described China as a place where “over a billion souls were deprived of spiritual guidance and wander aimlessly” (Jiang Qing 1989:64). And the main cause was the destruction of Confucianism and the incursion of an imported ideology, “the Marxism which has taken over as a national religion under the tutelage of the state” (Guo 2004:76). And therefore, the New Confucianists viewed their primary goal as reviving the Confucianism and replacing Marxism as national orthodox ideology to nourish the national spirit. While in trying to achieve the goal, the New Confucianists have taken a head-on collision with Marxism. And they also conflicted with the Western ideology, as they distinguished sharply between the Chinese (Confucian) and the foreign (which includes both Marxism and Western ideology) (Li 1998).

For the New Confucianists, the focus of their struggles with the Western ideology was Confucianism's stress on harmony vs. Marxism's emphasis on antagonism and struggle. Marx puts it, “no antagonism, no progress” (Marx 1956:61). While Confucianism posits that though the world is dualistic, “the two composing element are not hostile or incompatible with each other and on the contrary, they merge into a unified whole and

co-exist peacefully in mutual interdependence as a harmonious organism, as in the case of yin and yang” (Guo 2004:79). Besides, the New Confucianists tried to integrate Confucian ideology into the contemporary political institutions and moral reconstruction building. But their efforts mostly remained in academic discourses rather than concrete practices during this period of time.

The Anti-West Cultural Nationalism

As mentioned previously, besides anti-Marxism, “anti-West” was also a dominant theme in the cultural nationalism. The anti-West, especially anti-US sentiments were shown in the academic discourses about mass communication, cultural and linguistic studies. In the mass communication studies area, cultural nationalists claimed that “the dominance of Western culture in international cultural exchanges was threatening the cultures of developing countries such as China.” (Zhao 1997:735) They also argued that the Western countries' military colonization now gave way to “electronic colonialism” through satellite and television broadcasts (Guan 1996:2). Li Xiguang and Liu Kang, two influential representatives clearly asserted that “the Western countries are wholeheartedly intent on turning China into a country like India and Mexico” (Li & Liu, 1996:8). Another prominent figure, Guan Shijie, Director of the International and Intercultural Communication Program at Beijing University, even stated that “the time has come for the West to learn from the East...The Confucian concept of universal harmony will be dominant during the next century.” (Guan, 1996:4)

In the cultural studies field, those cultural nationalists pioneered by Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming employed Said's Orientalism as their ideological weapon to combat against the incursion of Western ideology. They claimed that “China's modernization since the May Fourth Movement had been an internationalization of Orientalism deployed by these Western scholars” (Zhao 1997:737). It was not an equal process for the Chinese culture. And therefore, the process of Orientalization should be ended and replaced by a Sinicization process with a nativist consciousness. Only in this way could China enter into an equal dialogue with the West.

Cultural indigenization also occurred in linguistic area. And the background here is that since the May Fourth movement in 1919, the Chinese characters were denounced as too difficult for mass public to learn, and therefore requested to be simplified or alphabetized (that is Westernized) so as to serve as a more effective tool for public education. The systematic reform was started in 1956 and the Chinese characters were simplified and pinyin, a Latinized form of Characters, was used to assist language learning.

However, in the 1990s, the cultural nationalists proposed against further simplification of Chinese characters and expansion of pinyin. And they claimed that Chinese was simply superior to other languages (especially the Western languages) and there was no need to alphabetize it. Besides, they “also endeavor to demonstrate that it is impractical and detrimental to reform the Chinese script in any case, as it is a product of the ‘Chinese mode of thinking, a crystallization of the ‘Chinese intellectual peculiarity’, and therefore a key component of national identity”. (Guo 2004:97). They lobbied the government officials and succeeded. Since 2001 when China's first language law was promulgated, there has been no mention of simplification or alphabetization of Chinese scripts in official documents any more.

In all, all these cultural nationalists shared a common theme in their respective discourses—upholding the traditional culture in contemporary Chinese political & cultural life and opposing the incursion and erosion of the Western ideology. And the “East vs. West” dichotomy is the most striking characteristic of the nationalistic framework.

The Recent Development of Chinese Cultural Nationalism

One of the biggest changes for the cultural nationalism in the new century is that it has gradually shed off its anti-Marxism and anti-Western covers and evolved into a pure “cultural conservatism” which aims at the single-minded and whole-hearted pursuit of traditional culture.

During this period of time, the revival of traditional culture has been extended into practice from the pure academic discourses in the 1990s. And one example was the popularization of Confucianism in the activities like the “recitation of classic Confucian texts” among the students in primary and secondary schools. And a total of over 10 million students all over China have participated in the activities in 2005. Another case in point was the great popularity of Yu Dan and her popular Confucianism which aims to help people deal with the pressures of modern society. Yu claimed that Confucianism taught us not to worry about external goods about status or money but only concern your inner attitude. “As long as your hearts are in the right place, things will be OK” (Bell, 2008: XV). “Her book on the Analects of Confucius has sold more copies than any book since Mao’s Little Red Book (actually most of Mao’s books were distributed for free)” (Bell 2008: XV). Besides, the traditional culture has also been dispersed into the Chinese popular culture products such as TV series, music and movies.

Causes of the Contemporary Cultural Nationalism

With regard to the causes underlying the growth of contemporary cultural nationalism, there have been various explanations. Some modernist scholars argued that the heavy manipulation of the Chinese government is the main cause for the cultural nationalism. For example, Meissner commented that the government’s funding for the large-scale research activities and programs for developing neo-Confucianism in China was the Chinese government’s deployment of Confucianism as “an instrument to counter Western influence” (1999:18). Barme (2009) also explicitly argued that the Chinese government aptly manipulated the cultural nationalist artists through a forensic analysis of a typical case, the opening ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing. He showed how this ceremony, a full representation of the regenerating traditional culture, was “created under Party fiat with the active collaboration of local and international arts figures” (Barme 2009:64). Similarly, Min and Galikowski also claimed that “the Confucian tradition has been revived by the authorities as an important cultural source from which a new national identity can be constructed.” (2001:160)

However, such explanations apparently underestimate the role of mass public/grassroots (including the non-government elites and intelligentsias) in the rise of cultural nationalism. They seem to assume that the grassroots were susceptible to everything that the state imposed on them without their own sense of discretion. They ignored that the state could not choose whatever they like to impose on them. For example, in contemporary China, the government would never employ African or Latin American culture into the nationalism. The truth is that the grassroots may only be sensitive or susceptible

to a limited scale of cultural elements which they and their ancestors had already identified in the past.

Primordialist scholars, by contrast, tended to downplay the role of the party-state in the cultural nationalism and they believe that it is the rise of cultural national identity which derives from the common cultural origins that lead to the mass-scaled cultural nationalist movement. For instance, Guo ascribed the cultural nationalism to cultural consciousness of “identification with the nation, particularly national spirit or national essence” (2004: 17). John Makeham (2008: 9) also claimed that, “the conviction that the unique culture associated with the nation constitutes the basis of national identity” is one of the most important themes in contemporary Chinese Confucian discourse. “The idea that ‘*ruxue*, *rujia* thought, and *rujia* culture (Confucianism) constitute a form of cultural expression integral to Chinese identity’ was pervasive among the discourse about Confucianism in contemporary China and covers a wide spectrum of participants—academic and official, mainland and overseas-based” (2008: 9).

Though these explanations may have provided some seemingly convincing arguments about the centrality of cultural identity in the building of the cultural nationalism, they, however, did not explain why only some/certain parts of traditional culture have been preserved and infused into the nationalist ideology, while others were simply discarded. For example, some traditional Confucian principles like the stress on harmony and stability were upheld while some about the inferiority of women to men had almost been relinquished. More importantly, they can not explain why the cultural national identity suddenly gained strength among the Chinese public at this particular time, not the 1980s or some time earlier, as the common cultural origins/framework, after all, have existed since long ago.

Some scholars ascribed the rise of the cultural nationalism to the development of global capitalism. For example, Arif Dirlik argued that the “global capitalism” should be the main cause for the rise of Confucianism in China because Confucianism has served as an “ideology to correspond to its apparently new de-centered structure” (1995:237). He related the “Confucian revival among Chinese populations” to “a resurgence in recent years of fundamentalistic nationalisms or culturalisms” opposed to “Euro-American ideological domination of the world” and argued that the “Chinese success in capitalist development” shows that “the Confucian ethic is equal, if not superior to, the ‘Protestant ethic’ which Max Weber has credited with causative power in the emergence of capitalism in Europe. A ‘Weberized’ Confucianism in turn appears as a marker of Chineseness regardless of time or place.” (1997:226). However, there are also some flaws in this explanation as it can not explain why this cultural movement has happened after the 1990s since China has been involved in the global capitalism since the 1980s.

The previous explanations, on the whole, *explicate the political, cultural and economic factors that underlie* the growth of the contemporary cultural nationalism, but they ignore the social momentum of the movement, which, from my view, Huntington’s theory concerning “modernization and cultural resurgence” can best elucidate.

This theory posits that modernization in non-Western societies can contribute to the resurgence of indigenous culture, in our case, traditional Chinese culture. The theory also explains the social and individual mechanisms that account for the

change. For non-Western societies like China, as Huntington argued, when facing the Western impact, Westernization, in its early phase, promotes modernization. In the later phases, modernization promotes de-Westernization and the resurgence of indigenous culture in two ways: at the society level, modernization enhances the economic, military and political power of the society as a whole and encourages the people of that society to have confidence in their culture and to be culturally assertive. At the individual level, modernization generates feelings of alienation and anomies as traditional bonds and social relations are broken and leads to crises of identity to which traditional culture may provide an answer. The casual relations are set forth in table 1.

This theory, in fact, can best expound the actual path that traditional culture in China has followed ever since China adopted the opening and reform policy in 1978. Initially, from 1978 to early 1990s, Westernization and modernization were closely linked, with the Chinese society absorbing substantial elements of Western culture and making slow progress towards modernization. And during this period of time, traditional culture was still widely conceived as an impediment to China's modernization process.

However, as the pace of modernization increased, especially after the 1990s, the rate of Westernization declined and the indigenous culture went through a revival. For example, after 2003, China's GDP ranking has risen rapidly, from the 7th in 1999 to the 2nd in 2010; and the GDP per capita, an important measure of average wealth, has also increased from 856\$ in 2000 to over 4,000\$ in 2010 (IMF 2011)³. During this period of time, the Chinese public became confident in the traditional culture. And in 2008, the Chinese people's confidence about their country ranked no.1 in the world (Pew Research center, 2008)⁴.

While at the same time, the strong social anomie and identity crisis produced by further modernization also gave rise to the public search for traditional culture. With the intensification of China's globalization process, especially since its entry into WTO in 2001, more and more Chinese became confused about their Chinese identity. "What does it mean by being a 'Chinese'?" This has become a common question raised in the public media. And along with the identity crisis, there has been a strong trend of cultural nostalgia among the common public (Billioud 2007)⁵, which, underlay the ascendance of cultural nationalism in current China. In a word, it is the further modernization that strengthens the Chinese people's commitment to their indigenous culture.

Conclusion

This article deals with the cultural nationalism in contemporary China. It first identifies the two basic themes of this newly rising ideology: (1) anti-Marxism and (2) anti-West by analyzing relevant works especially those among the Chinese intelligentsia since the 1990s. It also discusses the conservative trend of the ideology in its development of the new century. To fully elucidate the rise of the cultural nationalism in contemporary, this article adopts Primordialism, Modernism and Huntington's theory concerning "modernization and cultural resurgence" and constructs a multifaceted explanation illustrating the cultural, political, economic and social factors that have contributed to the rise of this important ideological trend. And the conclusion is that the cultural nationalism is the natural outcome of the economic, political and social developments that have been happening in current China.

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Table1. Modernization and Cultural Resurgence

