Introduction: Chinese Modern Identities at the Crossroads

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China has been rapidly propelled to global prominence in recent decades largely due to its economic power rather than its politico-military-technological pre-eminence. In 2010, China became the world's second largest economy, and in 2013 the largest trading nation. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, China has been the largest contributor to world economic growth. With its growing economic influence, China has moved away from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of 'hide our capabilities and bide our time' and taken a proactive stance in shaping the global economy. In 2009, China became the leading nation in the newly established BRICS countries. In 2013, China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) participated by 57 nations including Germany, the UK, France and Australia. In the same year, China announced its ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative for economic collaboration between Eurasian nations, which involves nearly 70 countries. However, as 'a developing country', China is at pains to manage its own transformations while trying to carve out an international identity amidst its growing global roles and external concerns over its rising influence. To understand China and its trajectory of future development has been a major issue in international affairs that will inevitably have profound implications in the world for decades to come. Heated debates have occurred in recent years surrounding assessment of China's domestic dynamics that might indicate what China will become. These views range from Daniel Bell's 'political meritocracy' (2015), Tu Weiming's 'cultural China' (2010) to Martin Jacques' 'alternative modernity' (2012) and David Shambaugh's 'four alternatives' (2016).

At the core of these studies is appraisal of the roles China's cultural heritage and Western post-enlightenment values play in shaping its modern practices, but more importantly China's interactions with the Western-dominated modern world (Wu 2008). As China moved away from orthodox Marxist ideology from the late 1970s, cultural traditions have increasingly come to the fore of China's development model with wider internal and external implications. Arguably, China's unique sense of history and identities may lead over time to a 'contested modernity' (Jacques 2012) or

'multiple modernities' (Mahbubani 2013) that are radically different from classical theories of modernisation and convergence of industrial societies – a view that has been dominant since the 1950s. Articles in this special issue engage with these debates as contextual background in examining China's cultural, social and spiritual changes, with a focus on identity formations, self-perceptions and their representations and communication. By considering the issue of representing Chinese society and its internal dynamics of change, the articles explore the emerging multifaceted 'China brand' situated at the juncture of past, present and future, and between China and the wider world. They are concerned with how hybridised identities are articulated, communicated and intertwined with situational, institutional and societal dynamics of change, portrayed by a diverse array of image producers. But more importantly, they investigate how emerging identities are interwoven with China's international outlook that converge with or diverge from China's historical assumptions and beliefs.

A crucial issue of China's modern identity has been the tensions and different modes of struggles between traditions and modernity. Despite the recent revival of traditional culture, China's modernisation process has been accompanied by intermittent attacks on traditions. The moderate cultural leader Hu Shi posed a perceptive question in 1917 that is as relevant today as a century ago: 'the real problem therefore may be restated thus: 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?' (in Schwarcz 1991: 95). The congeniality and congruence were never achieved in the constant wrecking of the past in pursuit of modernity in the 20th century. Modern identities have been intricately dependent on interpretations of traditions since the 1911 Xinghai Revolution. In imperial China tradition took the place of religion. It is tradition that provided the source of moral values, guidance, authority and legitimacy. Historical memory, as textually anchored attachment to shared experiences, nourished the spirit of the Chinese literati class that sustained the Chinese empire. History, as accumulated traditions, carries weight in the modern construction of authority in a different way – the appeal of defensive nationalism as a rallying call to mobilise support and solidarity for the political project of nation-state building. However, political and ideological battles have been fought over the role of traditions in differing visions of modernity by national leaders from Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. The current

leader, Xi Jinping, attempts to combine socialism with traditions in an innovative vein: 'Socialist culture with Chinese characteristics is rooted in our brilliant traditional culture refined over 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation' (Xi 2017). Traditions are seen not only as congruent with socialism, but constitute its cultural foundation.

As part of his report to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi's remark carries extra weight as a policy guideline for the future. It is part of China's renewed effort to underline the power of culture in national development and international politics. In the same report, Xi stresses culture as 'the soul of a nation'. 'A nation thrives when its culture thrives. A nation is strong when its culture is strong' (Xi 2017). Traditional culture has become a vital part of China's soft power building strategy (Cao 2011). Dirlik sees this national renewal as part of a global resurgence of indigenous claims to 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of knowing' (Dirlik 2012: 37). Paradoxically, the appeal to traditions and return to classical epistemology to reaffirm national heritage are products of modernity. It is natural, therefore, that the 'early-stage socialism' remains largely abstract and theoretical, while strategies of reviving traditional culture are specific, detailed and substantial, endorsed by intellectuals and the public. However, history is not simply the past, but a purposeful assembly of materials from the past to construct the future. History is a process of selective exclusion in the creation of the new and therefore remains open to constant revision and contestation (Glassie 1995). It is significant that there is no agreement about modernity and its meanings in China. This 'conceptual incoherence', as Dirlik observes, demonstrates that Chinese modernity exists only in relation to Euro-American determinations of modernity. It is the negotiation of the meanings of modernity that created a unique space to think about the past, the present and the future (Dirlik 2002: 29).

The first article in this special issue, *Rupture of Modernity* by Qing Cao, examines the historical roots of modern identities by discussing a crucial historical moment in the early 1900s when China broke with its age-old traditions in pursuit of modernity. Through the perspective of organic society, Cao analyses the 1905–7 press debate between monarchists and republicans as a case study to illustrate the radicalising tendency of the intellectual elite in their advocacy of new values, institutions and practice. Cao considers how negation of Chinese traditions laid the foundation of radicalism that became prevalent throughout the century. The article

summarises the discourse of radicalism as characterised by a missing empirical anchorage in society, the loss of a benchmark in social practice and institutions, and the language of coercion in enforcing utopian visions of the future. Central to the rise of radicalism, Cao argues, is the shattered link between external values and indigenous practice in the cyclical movement of 'organic' social change. Cao postulates the break constitutes a critical rupture in Chinese modernity that the current political elite must deal with to achieve an intellectual and emotional integrity of the Chinese cultural self. This article sets the scene for the rest of the papers, which deal with contemporary materials in discussing a variety of dimensions of modern identities and their relationships with traditions, focusing on their negotiation and contestations in a globalised context from different perspectives.

Staying with the print media, the second article, *Media Representation of China's Image* by Lejin Zhang and Doreen Wu, concerns the issue of self-perceptions and representation of China's international activities in contrast to external presentations. They provide an illuminating examination of different portrayals of China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative by China's official media *China Daily* (CD) and the UK's broadsheet *Financial Times* (FT). Based on thematic and lexico-grammatical analysis, Zhang and Wu consider the way in which the CD projects a multicultural outlook in promoting the OBOR initiative in a positive, harmonious though homogeneous image of international collaborations, mutual benefits and national development. They contrast such a portrayal with that of the FT, which foregrounds competing voices and divergent interests of various social groups and nations, and therefore presents a complex image of China. The article concludes that the FT sees China as a fearful empire to be wary of but at the same time an essential business partner to work with. Such a view reflects a broader Western attitude towards China – a full economic engagement but keeping a critical political distance. The conclusion resonates with the prevalent Western practice of separating socioeconomic and politico-strategic issues. The former is perceived in a positive but the latter in a negative light that explains much of the ambiguities and ambivalence in the way the West approaches China's international initiatives like the AIIB and OBOR projects, though with considerable national differences.

In the next three articles, Ding, Han and Harte examine fluidity and complexities of Chinese identities in films, revealing negotiations, ambiguities and tensions of identity formations in interethnic, intercultural and international contexts.

Common to these film narratives is the tendency of the Chinese state to promote a uniform industrial modernity in a single-minded push for industrialisation, urbanisation, marketisation and globalisation. In her article *Articulating Tibetan Experiences in the Contemporary World*, Shaoyan Ding explores the convoluted process of modernisation in Tibet amidst a materialist thrust of development, social anxiety and identity change as reflected in Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal's ethnic minority films. These films are relevant to other ethnicities in China in the accelerated social change spurred by industrialisation. Ding focuses her analysis on cultural hybridisation as a negotiated compromise between Tibetan traditions and contemporary experiences. She considers the role of technology as a symbol of modernity that has brought both convenience and destruction, contributing to a state of alienation in instrumentalising and objectifying human beings. Ding concludes that Pema Tseden and Sonthar Gyal as ethnic Tibetan filmmakers articulate genuine experiences of Tibet that subvert stereotypical representations of the region. Consequently, Tibet is no longer seen as the other, the object spoken of by outsiders, but is speaking for itself. Tibetan experiences are represented as dynamic, complicated and being shaped by local, national and international forces. The identity of Tibet is an unfinished story because it is still on the way of becoming. Ding's article raises a pertinent question about the controversial role of modernity in its multifaceted guise in a traditional society – a question that is seldom asked or seriously answered.

Moving on to the issue of transcultural identity, Cynthia Qijun Han discusses the constructed nature of the notion of Chineseness in her article *Negotiated 'Chinese' and Divided Loyalties*. She sees the notion 'Chinese' itself as a discursive site of identity construction in racial, national and ethnic dimensions in a globalised world. Scrutinising a transnational film, *My American Grandson* (1991) by Ann Hui, Han presents an adroit analysis of the transformation of Chinese American identity in a reverse process of 'unlearning Americanness' of an American Chinese boy during his visit to his grandfather in China. However, a parallel process of 'unlearning Chineseness' takes place simultaneously in the transformation of the grandfather as he grows closer to his grandson. The parallel transformation, argues Han, reveals the nature of contemporary identity formation as a fluid, negotiated and open-ended process as Ding argued in the previous article. What is significant in Han's perceptive analysis is that the transformative journey within the ancestral homeland begins from

metropolitan Shanghai but ends in a traditional rural village. Paradoxically, it is in the simplicity of spontaneous, traditional village life that the boy feels the joy of homecoming and belonging amidst family kinship, bonds and filial loyalty. It is in the closeness of human relationships that the dilemma and conflict of identity start to evaporate in what Han calls the 'symbolic triumph of the countryside'. Metropolitan Shanghai, with its glittering modernist façade, alienated the American-raised Chinese boy. The surprising experience of the young boy reveals the complexity and tensions of modernity and the sociocultural identities they have fostered. Loyalty, like identity, Han concludes, is constituted through the bond one develops with the social and physical worlds. Han's article critiques the nature of modernity, the purposes of large-scale urbanisation, and the complexity of human needs that 'modern' life may not necessarily fully meet.

In the fifth article, Duncan Harte turns to the domain of city branding in *Shanghai Cosmopolis*, which explores the official promotion of Shanghai as China's cosmopolitan and global gateway city. Drawing on Lefebvre, Harte argues for an understanding of branding as a multifaceted hegemonic process that seeks to foster a dominant understanding of the urban space. Focusing on the state-led re-branding of Shanghai as China's global metropolis, the article examines the association of Shanghai's cosmopolitanism with a constructed style – fashionable, civilized and international. Deviance from this brand may be repudiated as an affront to the city's cosmopolitan image. Harte contends that the branding process is instrumental to reaffirming the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and attracting inward foreign investment. Thus, the process is less concerned with articulating an ethical stance of hospitality. Examining Kevin Kai Huang's 2008 film *Park Shanghai*, which problematises Shanghai's dominant, positive cosmopolitan brand image, Harte sees the film as offering an example of what Lefebvre would term a space of connaissance, or localised and potentially subversive knowledge. Combined with analysis of the development of the Yongkang Lu bar strip since 2009, Harte concludes that these instances of bottom-up activities constitute negotiations over the terms of Shanghai's cosmopolitan offer. It is in these spaces of contestation that threaten the dominant, branded image of Shanghai, where a more genuine form of contemporary cosmopolitanism may potentially be found.

Moving away from films, the sixth article, *Putonghua and Language Harmony* by Natalia Riva, considers the role of language policy in China's projection of soft

power. By examining the Party-State's discourse in these two policy areas, Riva analyses how the Chinese leadership targets the domestic audience in promoting a higher level of loyalty to Chinese culture and its system of values. Central to language planning as a regulatory framework, Riva argues, is the Party-State's vision of harmonising China's language as cultural capital to enhance national cohesion. Language policies targeting a multi-ethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multidialectal China testify to how exploiting language resources has become instrumental in developing cultural capital as an important mode of nation-building. Riva concludes that promoting Putonghua, or Standard Mandarin, as addressing the multifarious language issues only responds to the need to strengthen the country's cultural power, social harmony and modern identity as essential components of China's comprehensive power, nationhood and sovereignty. The Party-State's vision of language as producer of cultural capital is, however, deeply immersed in a propaganda-type narrative which, through its link to the discourse of cultural power enhancement, attempts to soften the thorny problems concerning people's cultural identity and ethnic roots. Thus, Riva contends, the cultural soft power narrative becomes a useful discursive tool to present actions aimed at maintaining political cohesion and consensus in a positive light.

Like language, important historical sites are a significant part of cultural capital. In the next article, Jieyun Feng, Yanan Li and Peng Wu examine multiple meanings of Chinese cultural icons in *Conflicting Images of the Great Wall in Cultural Heritage Tourism*. Based on analysis of travel reviews, interviews and government regulatory texts, they appraise the perceptions of the Great Wall by three key stakeholders – domestic tourists, business operators and government regulators. Their study reveals surprising findings about tourists' experiences in visiting the Great Wall. Rather than invoking an emotive response to this most iconic of cultural symbols, the Great Wall is mostly associated with the quality of tourism services. The government as tourism regulator is more concerned with the preservation of the cultural site, while the commercial operator is motivated by the commodification of heritage resources. Domestic tourists' on-site experiences could indicate the oversaturation of the Great Wall as symptomatic of China's civilisation which has long been internalised by tourists before their physical encounter with the Wall itself. The government's key role in preserving China's cultural heritage is closely linked with the political elites' increasing reliance on traditional culture in its style of

governance. This is the topic for the next article, *An Analysis of the Chinese Communist Party's Discursive and Cultural Governance* by Jiayu Wang. Drawing on Elizabeth Perry's idea of 'cultural governance', Wang investigates the Chinese Communist Party's political discourse, focusing on three key themes – 'deepening comprehensive reform', 'the anti-corruption drive' and 'the new norms economy'. Central to his analysis is Wang's examination of how President Xi Jinping stakes the CCP's claim to a right to rule by responding to crucial sociopolitical and economic issues of the day. Reliance on cultural modes of governance is particularly pronounced in the CCP's discourse when traditional epistemology has been drawn upon by Chinese leaders to formulate pragmatic policies. Wang summarises three discursive strategies in the political deployment of cultural governance – invocation of political-cultural ideologies, the use of the language of appraisal as value orientation, and rhetorical rationalization and legitimization. Wang concludes his article with a critical discussion about the vital role of language in shaping, legitimizing and facilitating cultural governance in China's political system.

In the final article, Hugo de Burgh and David Feng return to the domestic dynamics of identity change in *The Return of the Repressed*. They assess the significance and impact of the return of Confucian values in recent decades that have displaced much of the Marxist orthodoxy. The re-emergence of Confucian epistemology is examined in three areas – the reinstallation of reverence for Confucius, the enthusiasm for the classic canon that has moved from a grassroots movement to a government policy, and the way in which the manner and content of public slogans have changed to reflect Confucian mores. They argue that the way in which changes in culture and self-perception occurred indicates the authorities have largely acceded to the aspirations of the people. Though it is not yet an established fact, the trend is obvious. In seeking an alternative route to modernity, China has revised and modernized its traditional culture and we are seeing the burgeoning fruits in the words and behaviour of its political and intellectual leaders.

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