TO SCREW FOREIGNERS IS PATRIOTIC:
CHINA’S AVANT-GARDE NATIONALISTS

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In ‘A Beijing Man in New York’ (*Beijingren zai Niuyue*), China’s popular 1993 tele-series, the protagonist Wang Qiming, a man on his way to making a fortune after a train of failures and betrayals, hires a New York prostitute. She is white, blonde and buxom. Wang decides to take some of his frustrations out on her. While thrusting himself onto the prostrate prostitute, Wang showers her with dollar bills. As the money swirls around the bed, Wang demands that she repeatedly cry out: ‘I love you’.

Reportedly, this was an extremely popular scene with mainland audiences, in particular with the Chinese intelligentsia.\(^1\) It is also the type of

\*\ In ‘Zhunbei haole ma?’ [Are you ready?], a recent emigré Chinese interviewee tells the writer Sang Ye that Chinese students and other Chinese mainlanders she had encountered in Australia ‘think that to screw foreign cunt is a kind of patriotism’ (*cao waiguo bi ye suan aiguo ma*). See Sang Ye, ‘Zhunbei haole ma?’, translated by Barmé with Linda Jaivin in Sang Ye, *The Year the Dragon Came* (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, forthcoming, 1996). Some of the material in this essay appeared in Barmé, ‘Soft Porn, Packaged Dissent, and Nationalism: Notes on Chinese Culture in the 1990s’, *Current History* (September 1994), pp.273-5. My thanks to the reviewers of *The China Journal* — Chris Buckley, Frank Dikotter, Michael Dutton, Andrew Nathan and Jeffrey Wasserstrom — who offered a number of insightful comments and suggestions on the draft of this paper, as well as their encouragement. I am also grateful to Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan for their editorial work on the piece.

encounter that has a certain paradigmatic significance about it. It could be argued that by having his way with an American whore while buying her endearments with a shower of greenbacks, Wang Qiming's action is the most eloquent recent statement (and inversion) of the century-old Chinese-foreign dilemma.2

This tele-series appeared at a time when both the Chinese authorities and segments of the population were becoming increasingly irate about their (perceived) inferior position in the New World Order and the attitude of the United States.3 To an extent the series is a reprisal of the Boxers without any belief system. It represents the coming of age of Chinese narcissism, and it bespeaks a desire for revenge for all the real and perceived slights of the past century.4

In their representation of China as a nation ruthlessly violated by Western imperialism after the Opium Wars, from the mid-19th century onward many literati pointed out that China's military and spiritual weakness had made it an easy prey to aggressive foreigners. Questions of racial and political impotence have been central to Chinese thought and debates ever since.5 Reformist and revolutionary movements in China over the past century have been born of a passion for national independence and strength. Most of the ideologically contending groups in China have, despite ideological clashes and heated debates, essentially pursued similar nationalistic goals.6 A number of issues

2 Another choice scene occurs when Wang's lover, the Taiwanese restauranteuse Ah Chun, says: 'They [the Americans] can quite easily imagine a world without China, but could never conceive of a world without themselves'. Wang responds angrily: 'Fuck them! They were still monkeys up in the trees while we were already human beings. Look at how hairy they are, they're not as evolved as us. Just 'cause they have a bit of money!'

3 At the same time it should be noted the series belongs to a tradition in which history or things foreign are manipulated in an attempt to comment on contemporary Chinese political and social realities. The plot and characters of 'A Beijing Man in New York' are to a great extent concerned not with the fate of Chinese in the United States as such, but with the Chinese themselves and their endless in-fighting. Apart from the elements of the series discussed in this essay, there are many other complex issues raised in it that also relate to contemporary attitudes of self-loathing (see below). That the action of the piece takes place in New York is at times coincidental to the central concerns of this often-incoherent and crudely-made production.


6 This point is made very forcefully by the noted writer and translator Dong Leshan in 'Dongfangzhuyi dahechang?' [An Orientalist Chorus?], Dushu [Reading], no.5 (1994), pp.99-102. For some of the basic texts in these century-old debates, see, for example,
central to debates of the late Qing, in particular those that unfolded during the two reform periods (the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 and the Qing Reform of 1901-07), including such questions as political change, limiting central power, new economic policies, and so on, have been the object of interest since the late 1980s. So, too, it is argued by some mainland academics that the overwhelming popularity of lengthy fictional works related to late Qing figures like Zeng Guofan in recent years stems from a mass yearning for a new strongman to lead China. To an extent the early 1990s nostalgia for Mao Zedong is also a reflection of these mass sentiments.

The end of the Cold War has seen the revival throughout the world of national aspirations and interests; developments in China have certainly not occurred in isolation. The rapid decay of Maoist ideological beliefs and the need for continued stability in the Chinese Communist Party have led to an increased reliance on nationalism as a unifying ideology. But whereas throughout the 1980s the Communist Party emphasized its role as the paramount patriotic force in the nation, mobilizing nationalistic symbols and mythology to shore up its position, by the 1990s the situation had altered. Patriotic sentiment is no longer the sole province of the Party and its propagandists. Just as commercialization is creating a new avaricious social contract of sorts, so nationalism is functioning as a form of consensus beyond

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Zhongguo jindai wenhua wenti [The Question of Culture in Modern China] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989); Chen Song (ed.), 'Wusi' qianhou Dong-Xi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenxuan [Selected Works from the Debate on Eastern-Western Culture from the Time of 'May Fourth'], expanded edition (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989); and Luo Ronggu (ed.), Cong 'xihua' dao xiandaihua [From 'Westernization' to Modernization] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1990).

7 In 1988-89, a number of articles in the journal Xin qimeng [New Enlightenment] and the Shanghai paper Shijie jingji daobao [World Economic Herald], for example, made comparisons between the late Qing and Deng's reform era. From the early 1990s, there has been a renewed interest in the Qing reforms (xinzheng) among intellectuals and the reading public. See Lu Jia, 'Wan-Qing zhengzhire ranshao quan Zhongguo' [A Fad for Late Qing Politics Sweeps China], Zhongguo shibao [China Times], 29 November 1994; and Yang Ping, 'Zeng Guofan xianxiangde qishi' [Revelations of the Zeng Guofan Phenomenon], Beijing qingnian bao [Beijing Youth News], 28 May 1994.

8 This view is expressed by Sun Liping of the Sociology Department of Beijing University in Lu Jia, 'Wan-Qing zhengzhire ranshao'.

9 This was contested a number of times, as in the case of the anti-Hong Kong soccer riot in Beijing of May 1985 and the anti-Japanese demonstrations of the same year (aimed against what many perceived as national economic capitulationism).

the bounds of official culture. But it is a consensus that for the time being at least benefits the Party. Both economic realities and national priorities call for a strong central state and thus tend to give an ideologically weakened Communist Party a renewed role in the broader contest for the nation.

Since 1989 there has certainly been an erosion of the authority of the Party-state, but it could also be argued that attempts are being made to reformulate and broaden the basis of national authority as the ambit of what constitutes ‘patriotic’ becomes greatly expanded. This is obvious in the Party’s strenuous efforts at patriotic indoctrination and ‘state-of-the-nation education’ (guoqing jiaoyu), aimed particularly at workers and the young. This movement was launched by Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin after the Tiananmen protests and climaxed in late 1994 with the publication of the Party’s ‘Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education’. Enterprising businessmen from Hainan and Beijing reacted to the official patriotic

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11 The term guoqing, literally ‘national situation’ (or Zhongguo qingkuang), has a venerable history in post-19th century Chinese cultural and political debate. The term has been variously deployed: to reject the influence of the West last century because Western institutions and practices did not ‘conform to China’s national situation’, to being used in the 1930s to oppose Communist ideology as ‘unsuited to China’s situation’. Since 1981 the Party has employed the term as a propaganda device as, at times, have oppositionists, and a formidable literature on the subject has developed, in particular from the late 1980s onwards. See, for example, Lu Nian, ‘Guoqing zhuanzhu gailan’ [An Overview of Specialist Books on guoqing], Wenhuai dushu zhubao [Wenhu Reader’s Weekly], 11 August 1990. See also the short-lived Beijing journal Guoqing yanjiu [Studies in Guoqing], published in 1989, and Zhongguo guoqing guoli, which started publication in 1992; and Wu Jie et al. (eds), Guoqing jiaoyu shouce [A Handbook for Guoqing Education] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1990). A useful volume of leaders’ remarks on the subject is Zhonggong zhongyang zhengce yanjiushi dangjianzu (ed.), Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping lun Zhongguo guoqing [Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping on China’s Guoqing] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1992).

12 See Jiang Zemin’s speeches in Zhonggong zhongyang zhengce yanjiushi (ed.), Zai xinde lishi tiaojianxia jicheng he fayang aiguo zhuyi chuantong — shiyijie sanzhong quanhui yilai youguan zhongyang wenxian zhaibian [Carry on and Develop the Tradition of Patriotism in New Historical Circumstances — Extracts from Important Documents Since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress] (Beijing: Hongqi chubanshe, 1990), pp.301-9, 319-26, 329-51, 373-81, 387-401. Li Ruihan, the first post-Tiananmen ideological commissar in the Politburo, launched his own campaign to ‘enhance national culture’ (hongyang minzu wenhua) both to fit in with the strategic shift in propaganda requirements and to counteract attempts by rabid ideologues to purge the cultural sphere. See Li’s ‘Guanyu hongyang minzu youxiu wenhuade ruogan wenti’ [Some Questions Relevant to Enhancing the Outstanding Elements of the National Culture], Renmin ribao [People’s Daily], 10 January 1990.

outpouring in a manner in keeping with present Chinese economic realities by announcing that they were planning a patriotic theme park in the capital.14

A period of relative political stability and intellectual stagnation has combined with economic frenzy to create the possibility for a rough-and-ready confluence of interests under the umbrella of patriotism. While many prominent dissidents are still banned from returning to the mainland and others are periodically persecuted in China — in particular when their activities among workers threaten the status quo — there are those who can travel freely and have become involved in various business ventures. One could speculate that it is only a matter of time before some aberrant exiles will be welcomed back into the fold as ‘patriotic Overseas Chinese’ (aiguo huaqiao).

In the broader context of Chinese society, since 1989 there have been numerous indications of a growing disenchantment with the West and its allies. People have been sorely aware that the post-1989 transformation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union has not been as rapid or as positive as first expected. As in many other parts of the world, there is a general belief that the West, its values and systems, have not made that much difference to post-Communist countries. For those who supported the 1989 student movement, there is the added realization that if China had then successfully undergone a major political upheaval, the nation could well have been faced with the disorder that now dogs Russia’s rulers.

Coupled with this is the underlying sentiment that the world (that is, the West) owes China something. Past humiliations are often used as an excuse to demand better treatment from the West. This has been repeatedly revealed in official Chinese responses to the question of human rights abuses, in particular in the White Paper of 1991.15 The popular Mao cult that flourished in the early 1990s had a perceptible anti-foreign edge to it. Mao ruled a China that was effectively closed off from the West, and he instilled in the nation a sense of pride and self-worth that it has lost as the result of Deng’s open-door and reform policies. While Deng is admired for what he has done for the economy,

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14 ‘China’s Journey Over the Last Century’, as the park is to be named, will be completed by 1999 and, in the style of modern edu-tainment displays, it will feature a century of Chinese patriotism arranged in a theme park in the shape of a scaled-down version of China. See Quan Xin, “‘Zhongguo shiji zhi lu: guoqing bainian aigouzhuyi jiaoyu gongcheng” jingqi tuichu’ [China’s Journey Over the Last One Hundred Years’ Will Soon be Launched], Beijing qingnian bao, 16 October 1994.

Mao is revered, among other things, for keeping the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, at bay.\textsuperscript{16}

The demand for better treatment from the international community was particularly obvious during China’s Olympic bid in 1993 when the mainland media called on the rest of the world to ‘give China a chance’ (\textit{gei Zhongguo yige jihui}). The internal propaganda campaign emphasized the primacy of a unique Chinese national spirit and the ability of the people to ‘move mountains and drain the oceans’ in their quest to create a perfect homeland (\textit{jiayuan}), a paradise on earth.\textsuperscript{17} The eventual failure of the Chinese bid was deemed to have been orchestrated by Western bullies, and the Olympic Committee’s decision to give the 2000 Olympics to Sydney was seen as an affront to Chinese national sentiment (not to mention a lost business opportunity).\textsuperscript{18}

While nationalist sentiment is repackaged and flourishes, the clamp-down on oppositionist opinion in the media after 1989 has meant that few divergent voices have an outlet in any wide-based public forum. Mass opinion is thus formed either by the salacious tabloid press and electronic media or by classified publications and news sources that reinforce accepted dogma and politico-cultural stereotypes. Although intellectuals have regrouped and produced a number of significant publications since 1992, the diversification of the Chinese media and the wholesale commercialization of the non-propaganda media have meant that their impact is marginal at best. Without public intellectuals or public debate, few of the more extreme opinions that do appear — for example, those of Yuan Hongbing in his 1990 \textit{Winds on the Plain} (discussed below) or Wang Shan in his 1994 book \textit{China Through the Third Eye}\textsuperscript{19} — get challenged except by pro-Party propagandists.

At the same time, as the older comrades and their dated politics fade from the scene, a major generational and ideological shift is becoming irreversible.

\textsuperscript{16} The new Mao cult (c. 1988-93) was an extremely complex phenomenon and the anti-Western dimension of it was, of course, only a small aspect of it. See Geremie Barmé, \textit{Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader} (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, forthcoming, 1995).

\textsuperscript{17} For a typical example of this kind of propaganda, see ‘Zhongguorende jingshen neng yishan daohai’ [The Spirit of the Chinese People Can Move Mountains and Drain the Oceans], \textit{Beijing qingnian bao}, 2 August 1991. The language of such writing is highly reminiscent of Maoist propaganda (in regard to the Red Flag Canal, Dazhai, Daqing, the Tangshan Earthquake and so on) that spoke constantly of the ability of the Chinese labouring people to overcome all obstacles and remake the world. After 1989, this type of language was employed in promoting the Asian Games in 1990, fighting the 1991 floods in South China and pursuing the Olympic bid in 1993.


\textsuperscript{19} Wang Shan, \textit{Disan zhi yanjiang kan Zhongguo} (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1994). Attributed to an fictitious ‘German’ writer, the book was actually written by Wang Shan, its putative translator.
Until now, narrow sectarian fundamentalists — people like the veteran propagandists Hu Qiaomu (recently deceased), Deng Liqun and Xu Weicheng, as well as elderly political figures like Wang Zhen (recently deceased) — favoured some form of ideological constraint on the unbridled passions of national aspiration and economic power. But the Maoist worldview that gave China some form of vision and sense of self-worth has been dismantled and lacks committed advocates. What remains is a crude pre-World War I positivism that has been revised since the late 1970s and further enhanced by the international media’s myth-making and hype regarding the economic and cultural rise of ‘East Asia’. There is a faith in science, material wealth, capitalism and national strength. It is a faith tempered neither by the moderating influences of traditional culture nor, for all the talk about China’s burgeoning middle class, by any modern bourgeois angst. Nationalistic and ultra-nationalistic sentiments are now found across the political spectrum, and we can speculate that many of the individuals and groups who hold such views have a following in the broader society. This essay will attempt to reflect the range of expression that such sentiments take.

**Oriental, Orientalism**

It’s a state of mind/ It’s peace of mind/ If you don’t mind/ Orientalism/
It’s east and west/ Forget the rest/ So can you guess?? Orientalism

Much of the more serious cultural/nationalist debate that has unfolded in the mainland Chinese media since the early 1990s has appeared in the pages of a number of journals that are based mostly in Beijing. These include *Dushu* [Reading], the oldest ‘liberal’ monthly, which has weathered the extraordinary ideological upheavals of the reform period; the two main organs of Chinese-style ‘national studies’ (*guoxue*), *Zhongguo wenhua* [Chinese Culture] and *Xueren* [Scholar]; *Dongfang* [Oriental], the joint effort of a coalition of cultural conservatives and ‘liberals’; and *Zhanliu yu guanli* [Strategy and

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20 See, for example, Willy Wo-Lap Lam, *China after Deng Xiaoping: The Power Struggle in Beijing since Tiananmen* (Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), pp.185-91.

21 These lyrics come from the Singaporean rocker Dick Lee’s pop-rap song ‘Orientalism’. My thanks to Gloria Davies for bringing Lee’s work to my attention.

22 For the comments of a number of noted scholars on the revival of ‘national studies’ in recent years, its relevance to the question of cultural nationalism and Western thought, see ‘Guoxue, chuantong wenhua yu shehuizhuyi shicang jingji’ [National Studies, Traditional Culture and the Socialist Market Economy], *Renmin ribao*, 6 and 27 December 1994.

23 For a review of these magazines, see Cheng Nong, ‘Fuchu haimian’ [Floating to the Surface], *Dushu*, no.2 (1994), pp.47-52. Numerous other publications both in China and elsewhere, like the Hong Kong-based *Ershyi shiji* [21st Century] which circulates in China, also play a significant role in mainland intellectual debates.
Management], a publication edited by younger conservatives, the latter two journals both first appearing in 1993.

While articles and dialogues published in the more easily labelled ‘liberal’ journals like Dushu and Dongfang generally skirt the issues of one-party rule and authoritarianism/totalitarianism, or only discuss them in the oblique esoteric code common to the media in a repressive environment, Zhanliie yu guanli is more direct in its approach. The general tenor of the many articles in its pages on the subject of nationalism24 is that the single-party state you have is better than the free-wheeling chaos you do not. Its editors and many of its writers are troubled by the lack of morals, spiritual vacuity and cultural lawlessness in China today.

In the first issue of Zhanliie yu guanli, Wang Xiaodong, one of the journal’s editors, rebuffed Samuel P. Huntington’s notion that future world conflicts would be primarily cultural in nature, dividing the world into the West, Islam and Confucian cultural blocs.25 Wang denies that China can meaningfully be classified as a Confucian nation/civilization and asserts that there is no desire on the part of the Chinese to Confucianize the rest of the world. He notes that Western values and civilization are generally welcomed by the Chinese, apart from instances where their transmission involves economic or other forms of imperialism. Any future conflicts will depend on economic interests. Ideological, cultural and other clashes, he claims, are and will remain little more than a guise for clashes of national interest.26 He argues that China will come into conflict with other powers because of its present economic strength and potential, which will make it seem a threat to the United States. He quotes Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia, commenting that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of one superpower, small countries have no choice but either to be obedient to that power or to resist it.27

Wang notes that over the past decade Chinese intellectuals have generally sought foreign nostrums as a solution to China’s dilemmas. According to these

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24 The Chinese terms for ‘nationalism’ most often used in these discussions are minzuizhuyi and, more rarely, mincuizhuyi. Mincuizhuyi has, however, a more narrow definition and strong elements of cultural determinism. One writer for Zhanliie yu guanli notes the mincuizhuyi elements of Maoism and their appeal to people in the present age of economic dislocation. See Hu Weixi, ‘Zhongguo jinxianaidaide shehui zhuanyxing yu mincuizhuyi’ [Social Transformation in Modern China and Nationalism], Zhanliie yu guanli, no.5 (1994), pp.26-7.


27 Ibid., p.49.
intellectuals, the greatest obstacle to China’s progress is a vaguely defined collection of ‘national traditions’ (minzu chuantong). But Wang questions: what happens if the Chinese come to perceive that there are active exterior obstacles to this ‘garnering from the outside’ (waiqu)? Such obstacles might be expressed in terms of trade, migration or some other form. His argument uses references gleaned from the novelist Bao Mi’s apocalyptic view of China’s future as presented in the popular futuristic samizdat novel Huanghuo [Yellow Peril],28 which is concerned with a war that results both from a struggle for resources in South China and international conflicts.29

Others, like Xiao Gongqin, the Shanghai-based historian who came to prominence in the late 1980s as a supporter of ‘new authoritarianism’, are more restrained. From the early 1990s onward, Xiao has issued warnings about the dangers of weak central government control. Xiao has pointed out that local mafias, corrupt police and economic cartels will soon have the country in a stranglehold and Beijing will be increasingly incapable of imposing its will. Xiao sees no solution in Western nostrums or in any political alternatives to firm Party rule. He has written on the role nationalism can play during the present period of ‘ideological transformation’ in China.30

Wang Hui, another critic of Huntington, commented in the same journal that the culturalism of Huntington’s argument and the critical tendencies of Orientalism, introduced into China in the early 1990s, have been conflated by Chinese intellectuals and have added fuel to the debates on nationalism.31 One of the most important points raised by writers like Wang Hui is that Western theories presently being introduced to China, including much post-modernist


29 The novel was written on the mainland and often circulated on computer diskette, and a version was published in Taiwan amidst considerable fanfare. The author’s concerns and reflections were supposed to be a direct response to the events of 1989. The book is certainly in the style of the ‘crisis writings’ common on the mainland from the late 1980s. Bao Mi told a Beijing-based reporter for Time Magazine that the book was ‘a philosophical tract against consumerism, not an attack on the communist regime’. Jaime A. FlorCruz, ‘Secrets of a Hot Novel’, Time Magazine, 30 March 1992.


theorizing, although challenging and relatively subversive in the context of the West, can be used to advance or consolidate cultural conservatism in the present Chinese environment or, as the Shanghai academic and cultural critic Xu Jilin has said, be yet another 'subterfuge in the cultural cold war' (wenhua lengzhande dunci) with the West. In early 1995, the London-based academic Zhao Yiheng published a lengthy critique of how what he calls Western ‘post-studies’ (houxue) had aided the development of a new conservatism among mainland intellectuals. There is an ever-expanding literature on a range of ‘post-’ subjects in China (post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, and so on) and, as a number of critics like Zhao have noted, such theoretical strategies are more often than not used to validate the place of mass commercial culture in the society and negate the independent and critical role of the informed intellectual. This plethora of Sino-post-modernisms, it could be argued, serves members of the intelligentsia as a means for abdicating their role as critics, a role that has often proved uncomfortable and even dangerous in the past. At the same time, theoretical approaches like post-colonialism are used to affirm the value of local and nativist cultural elements (bentuhua, as it is termed in Chinese, or ‘sinicization’) and even, one could speculate, a cultural and political status quo — and to reject ‘Western’ thought (sociocultural as well as political) as colonizing, imperialist and altogether unsuited to Chinese realities. By redefining intellectual debate in terms of


34 Zhao Yiheng, “‘Houxue’ yu Zhongguo xin baoshouzhuyi’ [‘Post-studies’ and China’s New Conservatism], Ershiyi shiji, no.2 (1995), pp.4-15. See also Xu Ben’s ‘“Disan shijie piping” zai dangjin Zhongguode chuijing’ [The Predicament of ‘Third World Criticism’ in China Today] in the same issue, pp.16-27. For a critique of these articles — and rejection of their approach — by Zhang Yiwu, associate professor in Chinese literature at Beijing University and a leading figure in this debate, see Zhang, ‘Chanshi “Zhongguo” de jiaoliu’ [The Anxiety of Interpreting ‘China’], Ershiyi shiji, no.4 (1995), pp.128-35.

35 Some critics also claim in private that the hue and cry over theory in China is part of a complex battle for intellectual and ideological supremacy (zhengduo huayuquan) launched by up-and-coming younger academics.
‘Chineseness’, these mainland disciples of post-modernism lend conservative and nationalistic discourse a cloak of up-to-date respectability.

Given the cultural confusion in China today, it is little wonder then that the works of Edward W. Said have been so well received. From mid-1993 onward there has been talk of Said’s work on Orientalism and the imperialist West’s distortion of Middle Eastern and Asian Others. A group of intellectuals writing in the January 1994 issue of the ‘liberal’ journal Dushu averred that the deployment of Orientalism is something pursued only by marginalized Western and minority intellectuals who are trying to validate their own flimsy cultural positions. Sun Jin, a scholar of theology, expressed what seems to be a fairly widely-held view: when China becomes a truly strong nation, niggardly theoretical and intellectual questions like Orientalism, Post-modernist discourse, and talk of a global Centre and Periphery will be easily dealt with. Then, and only then, it is argued, can China enter into an equal dialogue with the world.

But for many, an equal ‘dialogue’ with the outside world is seen as virtually impossible. A number of noted Chinese writers from Lu Xun onward have commented on exchanges with the outside as reflecting either a slavish mentality or an attitude of pompous, unquestioning superiority.

**Self-Hate and Self-Approbation**

The religion of the Chinese today is cheating, deceit, blackmail and theft, eating, drinking, whoring, gambling and smoking . . . We think any honest, humble gentleman a fool and regard any good person who works hard and demands little in return as an idiot. Crooks are our sages; thieves and swindlers our supermen . . . there are no greater cynics than the Chinese people.

Many Chinese pride themselves on being the harshest and most perceptive critics of themselves. There is a powerful, if hard-to-define, tradition of self-loathing in China. Its roots can be found in the late Ming Dynasty of the 16th-17th centuries when some literati used the language of

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36 They are, in particular, the Beijing-based literary critics Chen Xiaoming and Zhang Yiwu, although their fellows are legion. For some of Chen and Zhang’s views, see, for example, the record of round-table discussion ‘Jingshen tuibaizhedu kuangwu’ [The Wild Dance of the Spiritually Decadent], Zhongshan, no.6 (1993), pp.142-62, and ‘Dongfangzhuyi yu zouzhimin wenhua’ [Orientalism and Post-Colonial Culture], Zhongshan, no.1 (1994), pp.126-48.

37 In particular, the writings by Said that have gained attention in China are Orientalism, 1978, and Culture and Imperialism, 1993.

Buddhism and Confucian thought to engage in self-reflection. From the mid-19th century this impulse of self-criticism surfaced again. For over a century there has been a vigorous trend in both popular and intellectual circles to denounce the Chinese and China. In 1897, Tan Sitong, a young political reformist who was later martyred for his activities, saw the fate of China in Buddhist terms:

A calamitous destiny is now unfolding in China. It has been brought about by the evils committed by generations of tyrannical rulers, and also by the karmic deeds of the people during incalculable cycles of transmigration. When I look at China, I know that a great disaster is at hand.40

These sentiments are reflected in the writings and comments of many Chinese writers this century (the names Lu Xun, Li Zongwu, Li Ao, Bo Yang, Lung-kee Sun, Long Yingtai and Liu Xiaobo come readily to mind),41 and it is common to hear such remarks whenever politics, the economy, culture or the future of the nation are privately discussed today.

For many people, there is a sense that China has somehow fallen from grace, that the glories of the longest continuing civilization (summed up in the popular mind by the phrase ‘five thousand years of history’) are buried in the past and can in no way help China cope with its position in the modern world. The legacy of this history is felt to have been exposed as impotent when the Qing court was confronted with the military and economic might of other nations. The complexities and wealth of the written language and its culture have been felt by such critics to be a barrier to communication with the rest of the world. The political and social legacy of some two millennia is often characterized by the words ‘feudal’ or ‘Confucian’, deemed a deadening


41 Li Zongwu’s work was first reprinted on the mainland in 1989, and Li Ao’s essays began to appear the same year. Bo Yang’s controversial *The Ugly Chinaman* and Lung-kee Sun’s *The ‘Deep Structure’ of Chinese Culture* were published in China in 1986. Long Yingtai’s essays, which are highly critical of Taiwan and ‘Chineseness’, have also been available for some years. Ironically, the mainland critic Liu Xiaobo is banned on the mainland, although he regularly published social and political critiques following his release from jail in 1991. Of these writers, Bo Yang is probably the most vociferous critic of the Chinese national character. Some of his satirical essays (zawen) of the 1960s were first published on the mainland in 1993. In those writings he remarked, among other things, that what appears to be Chinese nationalism is little more than a disguised refusal to accept superior institutions and practices that are generally identified as being ‘Western’.
weight, forming a ‘deep structure’ that stymies change, repressive and ultimately conducive to neither social nor political harmony.

According to this view, every element of Chinese reality only adds to the crisis that is endemic to Chinese civilization, and one so profound that widespread economic development does not necessarily alleviate it. The list of problems is long and harrowing.

The population is catastrophically large. The political system (cosmetic Marxist-Leninist socialism with the characteristics of a police state) hinders the development of a mature society that can live rationally with the wealth that the economic reforms are creating. Environmental problems are of such a magnitude that they may well condemn future generations to illness and poverty. An arbitrary legal system relies on government whim and personal connections coupled with an erratic police mechanism that combines elements of Maoist draconianism with both traditional and modern methods of coercion. The media lacks independence and serves either Party fiat or fritters away its energies on consumeristic and cultural trivia; journalists devoted to the higher calling of pursuing truth and justice in their work are persecuted and hounded into silence. The carpet-bagger, get-rich-quick mentality of both private entrepreneurs and large numbers of state cadres are self-centred, short-sighted and unprincipled. This murky soup of a society is overseen by a Party leadership ridden with nepotism and one that rules according to the precepts of clan elders (a ‘Chinese mafia’, as some Chinese have dubbed it). It directs the life of the nation through a bureaucracy of such size and labyrinthine structure that it is little better than an administrative ‘black hole’. The educational tradition sanctifies learning by rote, and the educational ills have been aggravated by a utilitarian approach to knowledge. In the society at large there is a widespread lack of sympathy for the disadvantaged and poor, coupled with malicious jealousy of the successful; an interest in the new that is satisfied by buying up foreign technology and gadgets; a fascination with strong rulers and a pseudo emperor cult without a system of succession that can ensure political stability. This self-critique is topped off with laments concerning the Chinese populace’s complacency about the depth and seriousness of the crises facing the country.  

This far-from-exhaustive list of ills is taken for the most part from the many publications dwelling on national crises that have appeared on mainland China since the late 1980s. See, for example, Lu Yi et al., Qiuji: yige shijixingde xuanze [Belonging to the World: A Choice for the Future] (Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 1989); Li Ming (ed.), Zhongguode weiji yu sikao [China’s Crisis and Reflections on It], restricted circulation (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1989); He Bochuan, Shan’aoshangde Zhongguo: wenti, kunjing, tongkude xuanze [In the Hills of China: A Choice Between Problems, Dilemmas and Agony], revised edition (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1990); Su Ya and Jia Lusheng, Shei lai chengbao? [Who’ll Take this Contract?] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1990); Shi Zhongwen, Zhongguo ren: zouchu sihutong [The Chinese: Escaping a Dead-end] (Beijing: Zhongguo fazhan chubanshe, 1991); and, more recently,
This modern tradition of self-loathing is widespread and powerful. Born of a deep-felt anxiety over material backwardness, military weakness and political inadequacy, those engaged in this self-loathing recognize the role of the colonial powers in China’s crisis but tend to look for the origins of the nation’s troubles internally and in historical terms. Under Mao moral/political supremacy had been seen as an answer to China’s dilemma and the key to ensuring that the Chinese were not ‘expelled from the human race’ (kaichu qiujij); with Deng’s reforms, material strength coupled with the innate and abiding moral power of the Chinese world is believed by many to be the only way to overcome the nation’s various inadequacies. However, there are intellectuals who feel that without systemic change and political reform, not to mention national moral reconstruction, no amount of wealth and power will make China a ‘modern’ or responsible country. During the late 1980s, articles and books dealing with a powerful sense of impending national crisis, by authors ostensibly troubled by the mood of nihilism born of a rejection of the Party-state, repeatedly claimed that unless something was done the Chinese may finally be ‘expelled from the human race’.

Self-loathing satisfies a need to explain China’s woeful modern history while at the same time reaffirming a prevalent sense of national uniqueness. Shame, weakness and aggrieved sentiments of national humiliation are devices that are regularly used by propagandists and politicians to inculcate patriotic ire. It is not surprising then that not all the views on the differences between China and the Western Other are macho and self-assertive. Wang Shuo, the Beijing novelist and master of irony, shortlists about the superiority of the Chinese tradition of self-destruction. A writer who has delighted in excoriating Chinese foibles, from 1988 Wang made national nihilism into something of a hip youth cult, satirically validating as a national achievement China’s all-pervasive corruption. Wang has claimed that the Chinese know how to abuse themselves better than anyone else. In a book-length interview published in 1992, he remarked in a tone of smug abnegation:

Generally speaking, foreigners are pretty naive... They're materially extremely wealthy, but impoverished in the realm of spiritual culture. They've just cottoned on to smoking dope, and that's an artificial form of stimulation! We Chinese know how to get our kicks out of self-annihilation.44

Qiao Lijun, Chen Tianze et al., Zhongguo bunei luan [China Cannot Afford Chaos] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1994).

43 This expression was commonly used in the late 1980s. Mao had used it on 30 August 1956 in his speech at the preparatory conference for the Party’s Eighth Congress. He said that if China did not overtake America economically after implementing the supposedly superior socialist system for 50-60 years then it deserved to be ‘expelled from the human race’.

According to this view, which entails a kind of celebratory cultural determinism, China has not been able to inherit and utilize the past creatively yet remains different from every other nation in the world in that it has greater problems, a more complex burden of tradition and a more vile populace. In this there is also a strong streak of Schadenfreude. Hannah Arendt summed up this attitude in regard to a nation traumatized by recent totalitarianism, analysing the German situation in 1950, and it adumbrates an attitude readily found among the urban elite of China:

... Schadenfreude, malicious joy in ruination. It is as though the Germans, denied the power to rule the world, had fallen in love with impotence as such, and now find a positive pleasure in contemplating international tensions and the unavoidable mistakes that occur in the business of governing, regardless of the possible consequences for themselves.45

Many of the aspects of self-loathing were reflected in Heshang [River Elegy], the highly-controversial six-part documentary series that was screened in 1988.46 ‘River Elegy’ gives a sweeping overview of the nation’s history, symbols and contemporary ills. Later denounced by the authorities, the series’ reflections on China infuriated conservatives and nationalists throughout the Chinese commonwealth. The debate concerning ‘River Elegy’ provided the first public occasion when ideological opponents on the mainland and in Taiwan shared a common response out of a sense of wounded national pride. One of the key elements of the series was that it equated older civilizations (China, Egypt, Africa, and so on) with decadence, non-competitive economies and backwardness. This rhetorical device was aimed, on one level at least, at provoking the viewer into a patriotic response and feelings of outrage that the ‘Chinese tradition’ along with past Party policies have combined to reduce China to its present (1988) status.47

In short, one of the recurrent themes of ‘River Elegy’ was the sense of frustration and hopelessness that its intellectual-journalist writers felt about the failure of China to have become a powerful, modern trading nation. The series’ critique of the traditional polity and its ideology, along with its oblique references to the present regime, can be construed as being an indictment of


46 For the full text of the series, see Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, Heshang [River Elegy] (Beijing: Xiandai chubanshe, 1988); and Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, Deathsong of the River: A Reader’s Guide to the Chinese TV Series Heshang (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991). For sections relevant to this discussion, see, for example, Heshang, pp.16-22.

both the past and present systems' inability to turn China into a modern international power.  

While a number of the writers behind the series, including Su Xiaokang and Jin Guantao, have moved in different directions since leaving China in 1989, it is interesting to note that Xia Jun, the China Central TV director of the series, having weathered the storms of the post-Tiananmen purge in Beijing, teamed up with the reportage writer Mai Tianshu to produce two acclaimed peasant-based tele-documentaries. 'The Peasants' (Nongmin) and 'The East’ (Dongfang) are multi-episode documentaries made in northwest China and produced in 1992 and 1993 respectively. Filmed in southern Shanxi, one of the most ancient agrarian cultural centres of China (the 'Hedong' — 'east of the Yellow River' — area in southwest Shanxi), the makers of 'The East' limn a Chinese rural world marked by its cultural integrity; a pre-modern Chinese civilization not disrupted or atomized by social upheavals, political uncertainty or chaotic modernization. Commentators on the series have remarked that after seeing 'The East' it is evident that it is the 'peripheral world' which should now succour the spiritually depleted 'centre' of mainstream culture. Mai Tianshu, who wrote the series' narration, calls for a rejection of theories introduced from the West (he hints but does not specify that Marxism-Leninism is included in this blanket condemnation of foreign thought). One commentator notes that the significance of a work like 'The East' is that it underlines

the most significant stage in the spiritual evolution of Chinese intellectuals in the closing years of this century: they have abandoned the fleeting perspective of pseudo-Western tourists looking down on their own land and instead now look thoughtfully to 'Mother Earth'; they have gone through the baptism of enthusiastically accepting all fads of Western thought and returned to their native soil, the land that has nurtured our Chinese culture; they have left behind

48 A point forcefully made by Dong Leshan in ‘Dongfangzhuyi dahechang?’, pp.99-100, 101. The debate surrounding 'River Elegy' was partially revived in 1995 when Tang Yijie, a leading Beijing University academic, commented publicly that the series was valuable in representing a 1980s current of thought that was critical of 'Chinese tradition'. Academics like Tang, it was reported, are concerned that the revival of interest in traditional studies (guoxue) may be manipulated by Party conservatives to negate modern Chinese, in particular reformist, culture. See Zhongyangshe (Taipei), 'Xuezhe kending “Heshang” fuxing jiazhai, xuejie chuxian pipan fangxing shengyin' [An Academic Approves of the Value of Self-Reflection in 'River Elegy': Voices Raised in Academic Circles Critical of Self-Reflection], Shijie ribao [World Journal] (North American Edition), 13 June 1995.

49 The full title is ‘Dongfang — yige weide wenmininge shengwuxue jiepou’ [The East — The Anatomy of a Great Civilization]. The series consisted of six 50-minute episodes.

50 Mai Tianshu, 'Faxian Dongfang’ [Discovering the East], Beijing qingnian bao, 24 April 1994.
romanticism and passion in favour of practicality and rationalism; they have turned from cultural criticism to cultural construction and conservatism.\textsuperscript{51}

The world that ‘The East’ reveals, however, is hardly a utopian pastoral idyll suffused with cultural value and abiding lessons for urban dwellers. Behind its veneer of folksy voyeurism, the series affirms some of the most backward-looking, pre-modern aspects of the Chinese rural world, including male domination, semi-feudal social hierarchies and educational inequalities. Both series present a loving portrayal of peasant culture and traditional values that reflects some of the most conservative dimensions of the ‘national essence’. Of course, such native-soil conservatism is hardly unique to these television documentaries. China’s ‘new wave’ directors like Zhang Yimou,\textsuperscript{52} Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Li Shaohong have been creating works that contain undeniable elements of rural nostalgia (and voyeurism) for years. Their own complex brand of cinematic chauvinism (one that is informed both by the tradition of self-hate and national narcissism) fits neatly with a film industry that was born of nationalist aspirations in the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{53}

Elements of self-hate and moral disgust, as well as the more commonly reported aspects of protest and rebellion, were crucial to the student-led demonstrations of 1989. For large numbers of intellectuals and students, the movement seemed to provide an opportunity for the educated elite to move back onto the centre-stage of Chinese history after decades of being persecuted and sidelined by the Party. For their part, many Beijing citizens supported the protests in the belief that the peaceful demonstrations showed that the Chinese had a moral sense, were willing to stand up for questions of principle and, with a concerted effort, could overcome the negative legacies of both the imperial and socialist past. As the students so rightly claimed, the movement had a powerful patriotic and redemptive message, one which played a key role in mobilizing mass support.\textsuperscript{54} With the failure of that

\textsuperscript{51} Zou Yanfeng, “‘Dongfang’ de qishi’ [The Inspiration of ‘The East’], \textit{Beijing qingnian bao}, 24 April 1994.

\textsuperscript{52} For a critique of Zhang’s work in this regard and its relevance to the debate on the ‘loss of the humanist spirit’ in China that began in late 1993 (see below), see Xu Lin and Zhang Hong’s comments in Wang Xiaoming et al., ‘Kuangyeshangde feixu — wenxue he wenren jingshende weiji’ [Ruins in the Wilderness — The Crisis of Literature and the Humanist Spirit], \textit{Shanghai wenxue} [Shanghai Literature], no.6 (1993), pp.65-6.


movement and the continued stability (and transformation) of Party rule, it is not surprising that an entrenched pattern of political activism in 20th-century China has reappeared once more, one in which political activism and extremism once frustrated are transformed into egregious nationalism.55

The massacre of 4 June 1989 led for a time to an affirmation of the key elements of national self-hate: the innocent young slaughtered by an unresponsive and entrenched gerontocracy which was ruling over a nation that is corrupt, chaotic and, above all, not ‘modern’. The chance for a national redemption had been lost and with it the moral force and legitimacy of the rulers.

Prior to the upheavals of 1989, there was a vocal pro-Western lobby in China. While some of their number went into exile after 4 June, many who were previously politically engaged and remained on the mainland have tried to take personal advantage of China’s impressive economic performance, reasoning that money-making is not only a viable modus vivendi but also a revolutionary act that may presage true reform. In late 1993, a number of intellectuals in Shanghai launched a discussion on the ‘loss of the humanist spirit’ (renwen jingshede shiluo) in China.56 They lamented the fact that the commercialization and de-politicization of culture had marginalized serious artistic issues and, as we have noted above, that post-modernism was being sinicized by mainland intellectuals and writers who used it as a theoretical validation of their political disengagement, cowardice and moral neutrality in regard to the state.57

The widespread interest in the 1980s among the reading public in faddish Western theories like psychoanalysis, existentialism, structuralism and deconstruction had now dwindled. It was argued that intellectuals had suffered a new displacement in terms of social position and prestige from 1989 and that in the 1990s those who did not become involved in ‘abstract debates’ (qingtan or ‘idle talk’) about theory were busy themselves either hawking their talents

55 For a Chinese view of this historical pattern this century, see Yang Xiong, ‘Cong jijinzhuyi dao minzuzhuyi — shilun Zhongguo qingnian yundongde fazhan dongji jiqi wuqu’ [From Extremism to Nationalism — A Tentative Discussion of the Causes and Misperception of Chinese Youth Movements], Qingnian yanjiu [Youth Studies], no.7 (1991), pp.7-13.

56 See Wang Xiaoming et al., ‘Kuangyeshangde feixu, pp.63-71. This particular discussion took place in February 1993 but was not published until later in the year. This was by no means the first time such sentiments had been expressed by contemporary Chinese critics. Both Zhu Dake and Liu Xiaobo, for example, were noted for their criticisms of the vacuity of the reformist literature of the 1980s. See Geremie Barmé, ‘The Chinese Velvet Prison: Culture in the “New Age”, 1976-89’, Issues & Studies, vol.25, no.8 (August 1989), p.58, n.13 and p.61.

57 Mindful of various political and social taboos these views are generally expressed in an elliptical fashion. See, for example, Xiao Tongqing, ‘Xunqiu jiazhi mudiao yu lishi jinchengde qihe’ [In Search of a Correspondence Between Meaningful Goals and Historical Progress], Dongfang, no.1 (1995), summarized in Dushu, no.5 (1995), p.154.
in the marketplace or attempting to exercise a more overt political influence as ‘strategists’ for present or future powerholders. A mini-debate on this question of ‘humanism’, social commitment and moral perfectionism was sparked by Zhang Chengzhi, the Beijing-based Muslim novelist and proto-nationalist, when the leading Shanghai daily Wenhui bao published a vociferous attack by Zhang on the greed, vanity and lack of patriotic backbone among Chinese intellectuals and writers.

From the early 1990s onward, following the nation’s increased economic growth, there has been a new twist in this tradition of self-loathing. People observe that China continues to advance economically without embarking on a drastic reform of the political or social system, and the debate about the ‘humanist spirit’, mentioned above, was part of a cautious attempt by some thoughtful intellectuals to air these fears in public. There are many who believe that the acquisition and maintenance of wealth will gradually transform the ‘national character’, or at least obviate the need for any major shift in the public perception of the national character. Consumerism as the ultimate revolutionary action is seen by many as playing a redemptive role in national life, for it enables people to remake themselves not through some abstract national project but through the self-centred power of possession.

Whereas there was a strong spirit of self-reflection in the 1980s, economic success in the 1990s coupled with restrictions on intellectual debate and political repression have encouraged a sense of bravado. The national spirit that is being reformulated in the 1990s is not one based on mature reflection or

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58 See Li Tiangang’s comments in Gao Ruiquan et al., ‘Renwen jingshen xunzong’ [Searching for Traces of the Humanistic Spirit], Dushu, no.4 (1994), p.75. For more details of this major discussion — one of the most important of its type since 1989, see also Zhang Rulun et al., ‘Renwen jingshen xunsilu zhi yi’ [Thoughts on the Humanistic Spirit], Dushu, no.3 (1994), pp.3-13; Xu Jilin et al., ‘Daotong, xuetong yu zhengtong’ [The Tradition of the Way, Tradition of Scholarship and Rectitude], Dushu, no. 5 (1994), pp.46-55; Wu Xuan et al., ‘Women xuyao zenyangde renwen jingshen’ [What Kind of Humanistic Spirit do We Need?], Dushu, no.6 (1994), pp.66-74; and Wang Yichuan’s response in Zhonghua dushubao [The China Reader’s Newspaper], 3 August 1994, summarized in Dushu, no.10 (1994), pp.154-5.


60 In terms of the ‘humanist spirit’ discussion, the bureaucrat-writer Wang Meng sums up this view most succinctly while questioning its validity. See Wang Meng’s remarks, ‘Renwen jingshen wenli ougan’ [Random Thoughts on the Question of the Humanist Spirit], Dongfang, no.5 (1994), summarized in Dushu, no.12 (1994), p.146, where he says that ironically the very proponents of cultural integrity and independence still expect to be given handouts by the state.
open discussion but rather on a cocky, even vengeful, and perhaps a purblind self-assurance.

The faith in Chinese exclusivity is reflected even in that particularly Westernized art form: Chinese rock’n’roll. Cui Jian, the godfather of the Chinese rock scene, has claimed that northern, Beijing-based rock is completely different from Hong Kong and Taiwan imports. He averred in an interview published in late 1993 that northern Chinese can produce a robust, positive and socially progressive type of music that is quite different from the negative and decadent rock of the West.61 Other song-writers like Hou Muren, and Kong Yongqian, the designer of the controversial ‘cultural T-shirts’ (wenhuashan) of 1991, have pursued their work not because they want to overthrow the status quo as such, but rather to enrich the cultural sphere of China and make their nation more competitive with the rest of the world (including other areas of the Chinese commonwealth: Hong Kong and Taiwan). The authorities may view their cultural products as divisive and dangerous, but in the larger realm of China they are actually patriots. Others, going further, are emerging as super-patriots.

Yuan Hongbing: Pissing in the Wind

This race that dwells on the continent of East Asia once shone with a brilliance bestowed by the sun. Now it has its back to the icy wall of history, driven there by the forces of Fate. We must prove whether we are an inferior race or not, for now Fate is pissing in our very faces.62

Today, radical views do not necessarily issue from pro-Maoist ideologues or conservatives. One firebrand is Yuan Hongbing, a lawyer formerly at Beijing University and labour organizer, whose involvement with a ‘Peace Charter’ reportedly modeled on the Czechoslovak ‘Charter 77’63 and detention in

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63 This Chinese ‘Peace Charter’, published in translation as an appendix to ‘China: New Arrests Linked to Worker Rights’, *Human Rights Watch/Asia*, vol.6, no.2 (11 March 1994), is highly revealing. The authors use Party-style rhetoric to appeal to a wide audience (and perhaps even the authorities), and the egregious nationalistic sentiments and elitism of the document are in marked contrast to the contents of Charter 77. Yuan’s co-author, Zhou Guoqiang, who was detained in early 1994, has always impressed this author in private as being a strongly patriotic rather than democratic figure.
February 1994 put him in the front ranks of China’s small public dissident movement, although his philosophy is more akin to New Age Nietzscheanism than liberalism.

Yuan was one of the organizers of the controversial publication Lishide chaoliu [The Tide of History] in 1992, noted for its anti-conservative, reformist tone. Yet another volume authored by Yuan entitled Winds on the Plain, which appeared in 1990, is perhaps more revealing of his mindset and that of some of his coevals. Seen by some readers as a philosophical tract of considerable individuality, in the repressive intellectual atmosphere of post-Tiananmen China it soon gained a considerable following among university students.

In the book Yuan propounds what he calls ‘new heroicism’ (xin yingxiong zhuyi), a cause that is primarily concerned with the ‘fate of the race’ and the strongman as national hero and saviour. Like Nietzsche (a philosopher whose high standing among Chinese intellectuals has a long history), he talks of the need for madness and irrationality. Yuan condemns all individual attempts to achieve freedom as a betrayal of the race, whether it be to engage in politics or to flee China in search of a new life. He condemns those who seek from the West a solution to China’s problems. Indulging in what could be

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64 See ‘China’s Most Distrusted’, Newsweek, 21 March 1994, p.8; Ying Fu, ‘Yuan Hongbing kangyi zhengzhi qishi’ [Yuan Hongbing Protests Against Political Discrimination], Zhongguo shibao zhounan, no.101 (5-11 December 1993), p.17; and Merle Goldman, Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China: Political Reform in the Deng Xiaoping Era (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994). Official persecution has led the non-mainland media to classify Yuan as a ‘liberal’ or ‘democratic activist’. There is little in his writing to support this.


66 Lishide chaoliu — xuexi Deng Xiaoping nanxun zhongyao jianghua fudao caili [The Tide of History — Study Materials for Important Speeches Made by Deng Xiaoping During his Tour of the South] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1992). Yuan wrote one of the two introductory essays to the book. See Yuan Hongbing, ‘Rang lishi buzai beiqi’ [Don’t Let History Cry in Anguish Any More], ibid., pp.13-28. He was reportedly cashiered from Beijing University for his involvement with this publication and attempted to sue the University Party Committee for expelling him. See ‘China: New Arrests Linked to Worker Rights’, p.2.

67 Yuan Hongbing, Huangyuan feng (see note 62).


69 Yuan Hongbing, Huangyuan feng, p.216.

70 Ibid., p.250.
called ‘Sino-fascism’,71 he proposes that the answer to the political, social and cultural ‘ugliness’ of the Chinese is purification through fire and blood: total warfare ‘even if this creation means that our blue skies darken with the colour of blood that will not fade for a thousand years’.

In Yuan’s vision, the first step toward national renewal is a ‘totalitarian style’ (jiquande xingshi). ‘Only with totalitarianism will it be possible to fuse the weak, ignorant and selfish individuals of the race into a powerful whole’. The race needs strong, idealistic, dignified and free men to achieve this end. In his own formulation of the neo-authoritarian/conservatism debate that has developed in China since the late 1980s,72 Yuan says that his soi-disant ‘freedom fighter’ must be crowned by a ‘democracy’ that he uses to break the nexus between totalitarian rule and authoritarianism. This hero must put the welfare of the race above all other concerns, including those of the family.73 Indeed, race is an easy way of coping with the complex legacies of cultural superiority, political exclusivity and self-loathing that have been discussed. By emphasizing race, the question of humanity is happily circumvented, as are all of the knotty problems of political, social and personal morality and ethics that are germane to it.74

Winds on the Plain shares much in common with other views that are inward-looking and reject the outside world apart from the economic benefits that can be reaped from a relationship with it. As Yuan remarks when putting the case against the West: ‘Scientific rationalism has said all it can within the context of Western civilization’.75

71 For example, Yuan writes: ‘On the battlefield of racial competition the most moving clarion call is the concept of racial superiority . . . Only the fresh blood of others can prove the strength of one race’. Ibid., p.193.
72 The debate concerning neo-authoritarianism versus mass democracy developed in 1988 and has continued under various guises to the present day. See, for example, Barry Sautman, ‘Sirens of the Strongman: Neo-Authoritarianism in Recent Chinese Political Theory’, The China Quarterly, no.129 (March 1992), pp.72-102.
73 This is a summary of the parting words of the author. See Yuan Hongbing, Huangyuan feng, pp.267-73.
74 As Hannah Arendt puts it, people ‘have recoiled more and more from the idea of humanity and become more susceptible to the doctrine of race, which denies the very possibility of a common humanity. They instinctively felt that the idea of humanity, whether it appears in a religious or humanistic form, implies the obligation of a general responsibility which they do not wish to assume. For the idea of humanity, when purged of all sentimentality, has the very serious consequence that in one form or another men must assume responsibility for all crimes committed by men and that all nations share the onus of evil committed by all others. Shame at being a human being is the purely individual and still non-political expression of this insight’. See Hannah Arendt, ‘Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility’, in Arendt, Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954, p.130.
While couched in excessively purple prose, few of the views Yuan expresses in this book — one that was banned by the authorities for its ‘bourgeois liberalism’! — are particularly new, or Chinese. Nor are Yuan’s views on male primacy and racial strength unrelated to earlier trends among the priapic proponents of the avant-garde in the early 1980s. The well-known ‘misty’ poet Yang Lian’s ‘Nuorlang’ cycle of poems, although set in Tibet, gave voice to Han male dominance, and something of Yang’s tone is reflected in the recent writings of another poet, Zhou Lunyou. Known as a dissenting writer since his advocacy of Not-Not (feifei) poetry in the mid-1980s, the Sichuan poet Zhou Lunyou was jailed following 1989 and after his release published an attack on post-Tiananmen cultural trends. Lambasting the raffishness championed by Beijing writers like Wang Shuo, Zhou calls for ‘red purity’ (hongse chacui) in a tone of self-righteousness not that dissimilar to the tenor of Yuan Hongbing’s work. Zhou came out in favour of a robust, ‘muscular’ poetry, pitting himself against all that was weak, effete and clannish in the Beijing and regional arts scene.

A Beijing Bastard in New York

‘By the way, fuck you!’

In 1993, the intellectual portrayals of the national spirit were overshadowed by a tele-drama that brought into focus many of the questions discussed in this text.

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76 See Zhongguo tushu pinglun, no.3 (1991), pp.8, 11-12 (which is an official publishing journal.
77 See, for example, Yuan Hongbing, Huangyuan feng, pp.87-96
78 Zhou Lunyou, ‘Hongse xiezuode jingyi shenru gutou yu zhidu’ [The Significance of Red Writing has Entered our Bones and the System], Kaifang zazhi [Open Magazine], no.8 (1993), pp.101-102.
79 Zhou states that ‘red writing’ champions books that ‘are written with blood’, the blood of the heart’. Ibid., p.102. The relationship between the Beijing cultural avant-garde and its practitioners in the provinces is a complex one. Many provincials aspire to the recognition, both local and international, that has been enjoyed by Beijing-based cultural and intellectual figures. Many have relocated themselves in the Chinese capital in search of fame and fortune (witness, for example, the careers of various film-makers, writers and artists). Others regard Beijing as being decadent and ‘effeminate’. Writers like Zhou in the southwest or Li Jie, the Shanghai literary critic, have been scornful of the faux masculinity of the Beijing-style. It is significant that Wang Shuo, a part Manchu whose work has mined a vein first uncovered by the Republican-period Manchu writer, Lao She, is the object of scorn. Some Han patriots have blamed the world-weary Manchu canker for many of China’s ills in the past.

80 ‘Beijing Bastards’ (Beijing zazhong) was the title of the director Zhang Yuan’s unofficial 1993 film about Beijing youth culture.
81 In ‘A Beijing Man in New York’, this was the Chinese hero’s remark, in English, to his white American business competitor and rival in love.
essay. This was ‘A Beijing Man in New York’, referred to in the opening paragraphs of this essay.

This tele-series involved the archetypical trip by a hero to foreign parts, where he overcomes adversity, obtains fortune and sires offspring by ravishing beauties, leaving behind a legacy of riches and empire.\(^{82}\) Wang Qiming, the protagonist of the series, gives birth not to a lineage as do the heroes of other travel-and-conquest epics but to wealth, the legitimate product of his labours in New York and the means whereby the perceived cultural malaise and social impotence of China, as embodied by Wang,\(^{83}\) a dishevelled Beijing artiste, are mollified. For Wang, money = wealth = potency = self-validation = continuity. The series enthralled audiences. Its tone also fortuitously fulfilled some of the needs of post-1989 propaganda — as well as satisfying popular curiosity and prurience — in that it depicted the horrors of Western capitalism at the same time as affirming the positive dimensions (rags-to riches) of the market economy which China is pursuing with such energy.

Official and semi-official reviews of the series generally concentrated on aspects of Sino-American differences, emphasizing that the work ‘focused on conflicts between Chinese and Western culture, psychology, and concepts of values’ and that it would ‘help Chinese TV viewers better understand American society and help those who entertain a rosy American dream to become more realistic’.\(^{84}\) China’s physical poverty, wrote one commentary in *Dushu*, will give birth to many people like Wang Qiming, but the spiritual vacuity of New York will force more people to search for spiritual values.\(^{85}\) But one critic who writes for both the mainland and Hong Kong press commented that the unifying theme of the series can be summed up in one line: ‘Screw you America’ (*Meiguo, wo cao ni daye*).\(^{86}\) And audiences —

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\(^{83}\) Wang is played by Jiang Wen, China’s most popular male lead and a popular director. Following his work on the series in New York, Jiang Wen expressed a number of strong anti-Western sentiments and stated, among other things, that while the Chinese are increasingly being freed from their prejudices about the outside world, foreigners (namely Americans) are still deeply biased against China. See Jiang Wen and Luo Xueying, ‘Jiang Wen yanlide shijie’ [The World As Jiang Wen Sees It], *Wenhui dianying shibao* [Wenhui Film Times], 21 September 1992.


bureaucrats, masses and intellectuals — with a few vocal exceptions were at one in their praise of the show.

Wang Qiming, the protagonist of the series, is forced to give up his wholesome Chinese values to be successful in America. Yet his success shows how those native values have informed his actions and help him maintain a certain superiority and humanity quite absent from the foreigners characters in the story. And, in reality, Wang retains elements of what is quintessentially Chinese — expressed in both negative and positive elements of his personality — despite the ravages of American commercial life. Xu Jilin, a Shanghai critic, summed up a large segment of intellectual opinion when he wrote that Wang was in fact the television embodiment of Wang Shuo’s ‘ruffians’ or ‘smart-arsed’ (pizi). Xu also opined that the intentional misrepresentation of the United States validates a view of reformist China that is increasingly common among the Chinese themselves: the world created by a competitive market economy, the model of which is to be found in the United States, is one in which there are no ground rules, no morality or rectitude, a place where the strong devour the weak.

Conclusion: There’s No Time Like the Future

As the children of the Cultural Revolution and the reform era come into power and money, they are finding a new sense of self-importance and worth. They are resentful of the real and imagined slights that they and their nation have suffered in the past, and their desire for strength and revenge is increasingly reflected in contemporary Chinese culture. Unofficial culture has reached or is reaching an uncomfortable accommodation with the economic if not always the political realities of contemporary China. As its practitioners negotiate a relationship with both the state in all of its complex manifestations and capital (often, but not always, the same thing), national pride and achievement act as a glue that further bonds the relationship. The patriotic consensus, aptly manipulated by diverse Party organs, acts as a crucial element in the coherence of the otherwise increasingly fragmented Chinese world.

For decades Chinese education and propaganda have emphasized the role of History in the fate of the Chinese nation-state. While many Chinese

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disciples of post-modernism and post-colonialism are busy talking themselves out of a role as social and intellectual critics of the traditional and Communist heritages to which they are the heirs, the ideology of progress, national wealth and power continue to inform public opinion. History and its supposedly inexorable workings determine for China a triumphant march toward a strong and modern future in which all of the progressivist dreams of the past century — and the promise of Chinese civilization — shall supposedly be realized. While Marxism-Leninism and Mao Thought have been abandoned in all but name, the role of History in China’s future remains steadfast.

In the late 1950s, China’s utopian hopes were to surpass Britain and America within decades. In the Cultural Revolution, China became the centre of world revolution and publicly deemed itself the most ‘progressive’ force on the international scene.\(^9\) Now, it is the ‘Asia-Pacific century’ that beckons and beguiles.\(^9\) The new mythology of East Asian material strength and spiritual worth touted equally by regional propagandists and the Western media feeds into the century-old Chinese dreams of national revival and supremacy. Whatever the economic and political realities of that future may be, it is important to be aware that the cultural attitudes and awareness that form the basis for the attitudes of Chinese across political spectrums have been shaped by defunct Party propaganda and express deeply-frustrated and compelling nationalist aspirations. This is evident in the official Chinese media today, as well as in the mass media, and non-official intellectual and cultural circles. It is likely to be evident too in the future, regardless of the political direction the country happens to take.

Canberra
July 1995

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\(^{89}\) Liu Qingfeng calls this ‘neo-Sinocentrism’ (xin huaxia zhongxinzhu). See her ‘Wenhua gemingzhongde huaxia zhongxingzhuyi’ [Sinocentrism in the Cultural Revolution], in Minzu zhuyi zhong xingzhuyi, pp.359-66.

\(^{90}\) Beckoning, too, is the age of what one mainland writer, presumably inspired by Tu Weiming’s work on ‘cultural China’, has called ‘Pacific Confucianism’ (Taipingyang xue). See Wu Huilian, ‘Taipingyang shidai yu Zhonghua’ [The Pacific Age and Chinaism], Qingnian tansuo [Youth Inquiry], no.4 (1994), pp.9-11.