Cultural Nationalism in East Asia

Representation and Identity

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CHAPTER TWO

Representing China: The Great Wall and Cultural Nationalism in the Twentieth Century

ARTHUR WALDRON

Everyone knows the Great Wall of China: it fascinates Chinese and foreigners alike, and at both popular and official levels. Consider as examples a few items from 1990. In May, at the Great Wall Sheraton in Beijing, an American athlete and former Miss Arkansas announced that she would begin a run along the entire length of the wall. In June a cyclist from California was reported to have completed the first bicycle ride of more than one thousand miles “on or alongside” the wall. In the same month Chinese archaeologists announced an important discovery: that the eastern extremity of the Ming defense line was not at Shanhaiguan, as previously thought, but rather near Dandong, on the Korean frontier—or as newspapers around the world put it, China’s Great Wall was even greater than suspected, by 1,000 kilometers to be exact. In October a scholarly meeting at Qinhuangdao proclaimed that “Great Wall studies” had become an independent topic of research. Officials were much in evidence at this gathering, evidently sponsored by the National People’s Political Consultative Congress (Zhongguo renmin zhengzhii xieshang huiyi), and no less a personage than Huang Hua, former foreign minister and now chairman of the Chinese Great Wall Studies Association (Zhongguo changchengxue hui) made a further announcement: that the first international conference on the study of the Great Wall would take place in China in 1992. This meeting would be designed, at least in part, to put China’s most famous ancient monument to work on behalf of its latest government. But a little earlier in Hong Kong the monument had been playing a role in satirizing the post-Tiananmen political situation: a cover drawn by Morgan Chua for the Far Eastern Economic Review showed Deng Xiaoping as the little Dutch boy of the story holding his finger in the dike—in this case the Great Wall, behind which lay a brimming sea of change. Clearly the Great Wall was serving, informally at least, as a symbol for China, and in a variety of ways.

The wall has been playing this role for much of the twentieth century. The foreign runner and the bicyclist call to mind the former Flying Tiger and American air force general Robert Lee Scott, Jr., who attempted to walk the length of the Great Wall in 1982. Scott had first read about the Great Wall in a 1923 issue of the National Geographic, which in turn drew on the tales spun by the first American to have explored the entire wall, the eccentric Pennsylvanian William Edgar Geil. As for the Chinese, Jia Zhuanzhi’s observation that “Songs of the Great Wall [changcheng] have not ceased up to now” has remained broadly speaking true for the nearly two millennia that have elapsed since he made it in 48 B.C.E.

This chapter will examine the role of the Great Wall in modern Chinese nationalism and in particular in connection with cultural nationalism, the phenomenon defined by Harumi Befu as the attempt “to create, support, and foster national (or supraregional) integration by means of marshalling forth cultural and historical

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1 Shijie ribao (World daily) (New York), May 17, 1990, p. 3.
2 New York Post, June 18, 1990, p. 9; Boston Globe, June 30, 1990. The Globe reports the cyclist rode “over 1,174 passable miles of the 3,700 mile Great Wall,” the Post that he rode “1,065 miles on or alongside the ancient monument.”
7 Hsu Shu, 64B.2831, cited in the outstanding work on the topic, Chui-kuei Wang, “The Transformation of the Meng Chiang-nü Story in Chinese Popular Literature” (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1977), p. 188 n. 56. For purposes of exposition in this chapter I render chungcheng as “Great Wall,” although as I argue elsewhere, this is misleading: “Long Wall” would be far better.
China has an ancient and sophisticated culture, and one might expect that turning it to the service of nationalism would be relatively easy. But the case of the Great Wall makes clear the limits of such cultural nationalism, at least in China.

A good example of the successful operation of cultural nationalism is Richard Nixon’s visit to the Great Wall in 1972, when he made the wall both subject and setting for the most carefully prepared line of his whole trip to the People’s Republic of China: “This is a Great Wall, and it had to be built by a great people.” Nixon was using the visit to the wall to pay his respects to the greatness of China: to its civilization and its people. Had he lived a few centuries earlier, and been willing to perform the kowtow, he would have done much the same thing at the imperial audience ceremony. In those days, however, he would have been paying obeisance to a monarch and dynast; in 1972 his homage was to a people and a culture. And it was a natural homage. No one told Nixon to go to the Great Wall: he was drawn to it as naturally as were Miss Arkansas and Mr. Geit and millions of Chinese.

Nixon’s symbolic action worked well in 1972. The wall had been legendary in the West since the days of the philosophers. Americans were stirred to see their president visiting this famous world-wonder, and the still-uncritical media poured out misinformation about its origins and attributes: it was more than two thousand years old; it was the largest single feat of engineering ever accomplished by man; it was the only product of human civilization visible from the moon. The Chinese at the time were enthusiastic as well. Emerging from the chaos and antitraditionalism of the Cultural Revolution, they felt a natural pride in their Great Wall. In 1974 the Chinese delegation would present as a gift to the United Nations a spectacular tapestry, thirty-two feet by sixteen and weighing six hundred pounds, portraying the Great Wall and intended, according to Qiao Guanhua, then foreign minister, to evoke “the new outlook and new style of the new China.” And like the Westerners who had shown the way, Chinese began to walk or run the length of the wall. To do so was an expression of patriotism: in Lanzhou one of these walkers, Liu Yutian, was carried through the city by students shouting “Rejuvenate China!” But by the 1980s all of this was beginning to change. As liberalization and modernization faltered, some Chinese began to view their de facto national symbol negatively. Thus the first section of a collection of dissenting literature from that period, recently published in the West, gathers eight selections that condemn either walls or the Great Wall.

The role of the Great Wall as symbol of Chinese cultural nationalism, then, is nowhere near so straightforward as it may seem initially. At least since the early twentieth century, cultural identity has been perhaps the most contentious topic in Chinese intellectual life. The contention, furthermore, has spread from the pages of journals into the lives of ordinary Chinese who, perhaps more than the inhabitants of any other country, have been drawn into increasingly inclusive movements concerned both with the definition of culture and the affirmation of patriotism, at least from the May Fourth Movement of 1919 to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. This contention has not ceased, and it affects the symbolic uses and meanings of the Great Wall, often in unexpected ways.

I have written about the Great Wall at length elsewhere, making in essence two arguments. The first is narrowly historical: that the account of the Great Wall almost universally accepted until now—that it was built by Qin Shihuang in the third century B.C.E. and repaired and enlarged by subsequent dynasties—is factually incorrect. Following Lien-sheng Yang’s usage, I have labeled this understanding a “historical myth” and have tried to provide something more accurate.

For readers of this volume, however, my second set of arguments may be more interesting. These have explored the origins and development of mythic and symbolic understandings of the wall, in China and in the West. I have argued that although components of the commonly accepted contemporary version of the

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8 Private communication.
10 Ibid., October 8, 1974, p. 43.
Great Wall’s history and significance originated in China, the myth itself first grew to maturity in the Europe of the Enlightenment and was reimported into China in the twentieth century, at a time when that country faced an acute identity crisis created by the end of the monarchy and the intellectual onslaught against Confucianism. The departure of the Qing and its legitimating values created a vacuum at the heart of Chinese civilization that to this day has not been filled. The transmutation of the Great Wall into a positive and national symbol has been a response to this need. But the transmutation has been difficult, because through most of Chinese history the Great Wall has been a symbol not of national greatness but rather of dynastic evil. Its positive valuation is recent and has been more and more challenged in the last few years.

Thus one of our earliest accounts, Sima Qian’s description in the Shi ji, leaves no doubt about the evil embodied by the wall ordered by Qin Shihuang. After recounting the story of how its builder Meng Tian had committed suicide, stating that he had sinned by cutting through the veins of the earth, Sima asserts that while Meng certainly deserved death, it was not for violating geomantic precepts, but rather because he had conscripted forced labor and done nothing “to alleviate the distress of the common people, support the aged, care for the orphaned, or bury himself with restoring harmony among the masses.” Sima established the dominant genre of writing about the wall. It was used to symbolize both oppressive rule and military futility, and this valuation changed little over the millennia that followed. Ming loyalists writing in the early Qing made exactly the same judgment Sima Qian had: the massive wall-building projects of the sixteenth century—which produced the impressive structures visited today—were expressions of corrupt rule and military impotence, and they contributed directly to Ming’s decline and fall.

What is more, this moral critique of the Great Wall, enunciated by China’s literati, had a powerful counterpart in the popular tradition. We even possess four lines that probably originated in an ancient popular ballad about the wall. They warn parents, “If a son is born, mind you don’t raise him! If a girl is born, feed her dried meat. Don’t you just see below the Long Wall/Dead men’s skeletons prop each other up.”

But the most powerful and enduring expression of popular attitudes toward the wall is found in the story of Meng Jiangnü, a woman who traveled to the north in search of her husband, who had been impressed as a laborer to build the Great Wall. On arrival she learned that he had died and his body had been tossed into the rubble filling the wall. Meng Jiangnü broke down on hearing this; her tears so moved Heaven that the wall broke open, revealing her husband’s bones, which she took back to his native place for a proper burial. The most rudimentary versions of this poignant tale of a strong woman (who in various more developed versions married across class lines and committed suicide rather than marry the Qin emperor) are of great antiquity, but the story remains vital and alive in China up to the present. In the 1970s peasants in central Hunan flocked from miles around to hear a blind singer chant the story at a funeral. And we will see below how it entangled Mao Zedong.

Positive evaluation of the wall came initially not from Chinese but from Westerners. From the Jesuits on, Europeans tended to see the Great Wall as something extraordinary as well as uniquely Chinese. Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88) asserted that “the seven wonders of the world put together are not comparable to this work; and all that Fame hath published concerning it among the Europeans, comes far short of what I myself have seen.” By the late nineteenth century Westerners were developing a whole romantic representational genre based on the wall. There were impressive pseudoscientific assertions about it—for example, John Barrow’s (1764–1848) statement (still repeated today) that the amount of stone in the wall was equivalent to “all the dwelling houses of England and Scotland.” There were romantic engravings.

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17 Anne Birrell, New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry, Translated with Annotations and Introduction (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932), p. 49. These four lines are found in a number of different poems, and it is thought that they originated in a popular ballad.
were entrancing descriptions in Western languages of the sort that would appear in Chinese a century later:

It is a supremely wonderful sight! To think that these walls, built in apparently inaccessible places, as though to balance the Milky Way in the sky, a walled way over the mountain tops, are the work of men, makes it seem like a dream... This fantastic serpent of stone, its battlements devoid of canoons, its loopholes empty of rifles... will be stored in my mind like a magic vision.22

And there was the remarkable claim, first made explicitly by Gei in 1909, that the Great Wall would be visible from the moon.23

A mythified vision of the Great Wall took shape in the West. In the mid twentieth century it would be reintroduced into China and form the core of the Chinese Great Wall cult to which this chapter will be devoted. But its progress into China was not easy. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) was among the first Chinese to adopt the positive Western evaluation of the wall. In the Sun Wen xuexuho he argued that the wall was the greatest of all engineering feats in China and that on balance it had been positive in its influence. True, Qin Shihuang had been a despot. But had he not constructed the wall, China would early on have been conquered and absorbed by nomads.24 But better-informed scholars resisted such ideas: Liang Qichao (1873–1928), for example, made an example of misconceptions about the Great Wall in his book Zhongguo lishi yanjiu.25 And Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren 1881–1936) condemned the wall in a fragment published in 1925. It had cost many lives and he personally felt surrounded and enclosed by it. It was, furthermore, constructed of “both old and new bricks.” But it had majesty and strength as well: it was the “Mighty and accursed Great Wall.”26

The wall started to become a more positive symbol for the Chinese, and particularly those on the left, only as the war with Japan broke out.27 In 1935, the year the Communists fled to

Yanan, Mao Zedong wrote a few lines that would be widely quoted: “We've scored a march of twenty thousand li/We shall the Great Wall reach./Or no true soldiers be!”28 The same year ushered in the “March of the Volunteers,” composed by Nie Er (1911–35) with lyrics by Tian Han (1898–1968). It calls upon all “who will not be slaves/to take our own flesh and blood, to build a new Great Wall.” Eventually the march would be adopted as the official national anthem of the People’s Republic of China.29 The dawn of “New China” after 1949 brought a short-lived period of celebration and reconstruction of the Great Wall.30 For much of the history of the People’s Republic, however, the Great Wall was overshadowed by the cult of Mao Zedong.

This cult was already very much in evidence in 1949, but it exploded in the late 1960s. Portraits of Mao displaced family gods at peasant home altars; the “little red book” replaced the entire academic curriculum; the size and shape of the Mao badge became the leading index of fashion. Like Russians a few decades earlier who had adopted names such as Ninel (“Lenin” spelled backwards) or Melor (Marx–Engels–Lenin–October Revolution), Chinese called themselves Weidong (Protect Mao Zedong) or Yonghong (eternally red). At its peak, the worship of Mao encompassed every aspect of Chinese life. But Mao proved mortal, and the cultural vacuum created by his death and the subsequent discrediting of his politics brought the Great Wall back to center stage in China’s symbolic politics.

For in addition to being a way of organizing production, communism was, as Leszek Kolakowski and others have pointed out, a cultural system.31 It had its myths, its rituals, its heroes, and its holidays.32 The culture of communism was furthermore explicitly internationalist. Its rhetoric and theory stressed working-class solidarity across national borders; and its cultural products, from novels to architecture, were strikingly similar whether produced in

32 For a good study of the USSR, see Christel Lane, The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
Warsaw, Moscow, Ulaanbaatar, or Beijing. Indeed, precisely the priority given by socialist theory to modern concepts of development over the seemingly outdated categories of nationality attracted many Chinese intellectuals to it. China’s tradition, they believed, was hostile to modernity and had to be displaced, although this process could not be completed in an instant. So a sanctified Marxism, a “socialism with Chinese characteristics” would provide a viable way forward. It is true that China and the Soviet Union became political adversaries rather quickly. But such political nationalism is not the same as the cultural nationalism with which this volume is concerned. During the very period when Sino-Soviet tensions were their highest, both countries continued to lay waste to their own pasts. In the Soviet Union the routinized and bureaucratic destruction of Orthodox Church buildings far outpaced anything seen even under Stalin, while the Cultural Revolution in China saw a veritable holocaust of the past, justified by utopian Marxist visions of an entirely new society radically distinct from all that had gone before. Only with the collapse of communism in most of the world have China and the Soviet Union begun the complex process of reassessing and recasting their distinctly national pasts with a view to serving post-Communist political forms.

This process of reassessment got under way in China following the loss of faith in Maoism in the early 1980s, and as will be seen, it ran very deep. It was greatly complicated by the massacre of June 3–4, 1989, and the attempt that followed to maintain orthodox communism in China at gunpoint. Both of these developments, however, underline the renewed importance of culture in the Chinese political debate. They have confronted the Chinese with a crisis of personal and national faith, which in turn has led them, both leaders and population, to focus once again on their national culture as the ultimate foundation for identity and legitimacy. These developments are full of interest and irony, and they occur along several dimensions.

The first stage involved material culture. After Mao Zedong’s death in 1976 China began to awaken from the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution and to take an inventory of damage. What remained of the physical Chinese world long taken for granted? How many city walls, how many ceremonial arches, how many antique buildings, how many temples, how many books, how many people who could read them? The results were devastating. At least since the May Fourth Movement traditional culture had been lavishly praised and extravagantly condemned by Chinese. But few expected it could actually be destroyed: its permanent defining role was taken for granted. By the early 1980s, however, it was clear that the Cultural Revolution had largely succeeded, physically at least. Beijing, for example, stripped of its walls and with most of its ancient buildings cleared away, had been transformed from one of the world’s most ancient and perfectly preserved national capitals to a characterless modern city whose new monuments aped foreign styles: steel-and-glass office blocks, hotels on the Hong Kong model. At a time when national legitimacy was increasingly being defined in terms of China’s long cultural tradition, these facts were profoundly unnerving and demoralizing. Irreparable damage to China’s cultural heritage endangered the nation’s very sense of identity.

China’s leading newspapers began turning their attention to this damage in the spring of 1980. For more than a decade factories and farms had been established without regard for their effect on cultural relics, and throughout the summer one horror story after another broke. The famous “ruins of Yin [Yinxi]” at Anyang had been badly damaged by waste from a steel mill erected on the site. Many Han dynasty tombs had been demolished for bricks in Sichuan. More than four hundred ancient cedar trees around the tomb of the legendary emperor Huangdi (r. 2698–2598 B.C.E.) in Shaanxi had been cut down and used to make coffins by the very organization charged with preserving the site. Cultural collections were in chaos: for example, more than two thousand items from the Luoyang museum were discovered to have been destroyed while being transported to a warehouse in 1977. Ming dynasty buildings were being torn down and cleared in Shaanxi. But in terms of

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35 “Cong chai changzhou zhuo xiaogqi de,” Jiefang ribao (Shanghai), July 15, 1980.
38 “Shaanxi tingzhi chaishui Mingsai gu jianzhu,” Renmin ribao, May 9, 1983.
media coverage and governmental response, by far the biggest story involved the Great Wall.

For at least a decade peasants and production teams had been using the wall as a convenient source of building materials. On May 25, 1980, the Guangming ribao published perhaps the first article calling attention to the problem. Entitled “An Urgent Appeal: Preserve the Great Wall!” and using language straight out of the Cultural Revolution, it reported that the “wind of tearing down the wall” (chaicheng zhi feng) had already “blown as far as Badaling.” That pride and symbol of “the Chinese nation” (Zhonghua minzu) was in danger of “disappearing from the face of the earth.”

Two weeks later it was reported that in Hebei, peasants led by their party secretary had used bricks from the wall to build everything from an electrical power substation to a public toilet. Higher authorities ordered the buildings demolished and the bricks returned. At Xifengkou, to the east of the capital, an illustrated story showed quarrying machinery in place and reported that little more than foundations remained of many once spectacular walls and towers. In all, hundreds of kilometers of wall had been destroyed and the material used for road, reservoir, and building construction.

Such examples of cultural destruction prompted soul-searching. “I was always told by my teachers,” wrote one commentator, “that ours was a country of ancient culture” (wenhua guoguo). Faced with such vandalism, however, he wondered whether that could still be said. A discussion developed about how ancient monuments could be preserved and used in modern times. One Chinese student who had studied in Romania wrote of how beautifully authorities in Timisoara had preserved the ruins of that city’s seventeenth-century walls; grass, flowers, and shrubs had been planted on and around them, and in places the thick fortifications had been hollowed out to create arcades, with bookshops, restaurants, and cafés. Would that China had done the same with the magnificent Beijing city walls? Experts on antiquities proposed the creation of new

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40 “Xianglong xian yanchu Erdache dadi chakhu changcheng shijian,” Renmin ribao, June 6, 1980, p. 5.
43 “Cong chai changcheng zhuo xiangqi de,” Jiefang ribao (Shanghai), July 15, 1980.
44 “Gu changqiang he huchenghe yigai liyong qilai,” Renmin ribao, August 23,
The People's Republic of China also seemed to have adopted the Great Wall as a national symbol. Ordinary people donated money to the work of reconstruction. A poignant sketch by Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye, "Her Tribute," tells of a schoolteacher in her fifties, much scarred spiritually by the turmoil of the 1960s, who decides to contribute to Great Wall rebuilding all of the 250 yuan left by her husband at his death. Anyone who has taught Chinese from the People's Republic knows well the end-of-term present, almost invariably some sort of image of the Great Wall.

This background should make easier to understand the shock created by the section on the Great Wall in "Fate" (mingyun), the second installment of the controversial television series "River Elegy" (Heshang) screened in China early in 1988. The images of the wall were familiar, whether showing it winding through the cool green mountains of the capital region or standing sunburned in the deserts of the west. But the commentary seemed blasphemous:

If the Great Wall could speak, surely it would tell the descendants of the Yellow Emperor in all honesty that it is nothing but a massive monument to tragedy, cast in its present form by historical fate. The Great Wall cannot represent strength or progress or glory: it is a symbol of confinement, conservatism, impotent defense, and timid in the face of invasion. Because of its massive scale and ancient history it has left the imprint of its grand conceit and self-deception on the very souls of the Chinese. Ah! Great Wall, why do we still sing your praises? A new evaluation of the Great Wall, part of a larger reevaluation of the relationship between culture and Chinese nationhood, was clearly under way.

Heshang was the defining cultural event in China during 1988. It was produced with official support, directly from Chen Hanyuan, the director of China's central television station, and indirectly from Zhao Ziyang (1919– ), by a group of young Chinese artists and intellectuals, of whom perhaps the most important was Su Xiaokang (1949– ). Its six episodes had a powerful effect on the Chinese audience; accustomed to formulaic propaganda presenta-


53 The text may be found in Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang, Heshang; background essays are collected in Su Xiaokang and Wang Luxiang Long de beiqiang (Taipei: Fengyun shidai chubangongsi, 1989); perhaps the best overall interpretative survey is Jöel Thoraval, "La tradition rieuse: Réflexions sur l'Éléglise du Fleur de Su Xiaokang," Bulletin de Sinologie, n.s., 61 (November 1989), pp. 18–32.

54 Heshang, pp. 68–69.
toward culture and identity. “Many people,” according to the New York Times,

have begun to look at the symbols of the country in a different way, to see them as illustrations of backwardness and tools of repression rather than as images of national glory. On the Great Wall, for example, one man had this to say: “It is a deterrent to man’s search for the truth because it is symbolic of the Emperor Qin Shi Huang, who was one of our worst tyrants. The one and only time I went to the wall I saw nothing wonderful about it. I remembered the million young men who died building it.”

In many ways, the enterprise of Heshang seems similar to that of the May Fourth Movement. It is an attempt to understand and to change Chinese culture for specifically national ends. And it simultaneously addresses both China’s elite and its popular masses. But closer examination reveals that the issues of cultural nationalism as Heshang deals with them are understood quite differently from the way they had been understood seventy years earlier.

The intellectual trends that gave rise to Heshang carried the new concern with culture decisively beyond the material realm, into the world of interpretation. Both the “New Culture” movement of the 1910s and 1920s and the as yet unnamed cultural reassessment of the 1980s necessarily involved some understanding of a “tradition” (chuan tong), to which enlightenment is opposed. The first major difference between the two movements is evident here. The critics of 1919 had no doubt about what the “Chinese tradition” was. They had grown up in it: they had been born into extended families, schooled in the classics, married to wives their parents had chosen, and so forth. For them the break with the past to which their intellects drove them was personally painful and sometimes impossible. Lu Xun, for example, an extreme iconoclast, kept his personal diary in classical Chinese, the language in which he felt most at home.

Su Xiaokang and his generation, by contrast, are the products of a period of “deculturation” in China. Su himself is the son of Su Xing, a member of the Communist elite: vice-director of the central party school and deputy editor of the premier theoretical journal Hongqi (Red Flag). He grew up not in a traditional but in a believing Marxist household and in a China that was not “traditional” but rather already transformed profoundly by communism.

Members of the May Fourth generation were driven to consider Chinese culture by their encounter with the challenge of imperialism and modernity, whether in the treaty ports with their well-paved roads, Sikh policemen, street lights, and large and privileged foreign populations or as a result of study and residence abroad. The formative experience for the authors of Heshang, by contrast, was an encounter with the raw life of the Chinese countryside. Su spent ten years in a village in Henan. There, while experiencing the deprivation that remains the lot of the Chinese peasant, he also learned of the then unpublicized horrors of the early Communist period—notably, the mass starvation that had claimed tens of millions during the Great Leap Forward and had hit Henan (under the leadership of the extreme Maoist Wu Zhi) particularly hard. According to some interpreters, Su took these horrors of peasant life as a product of tradition, and one cannot help but notice that the name of the province in which he observed them means literally “south of the [Yellow] river.”

But the life Su saw life in Henan was not traditional. With the breakdown of the collectivist order in the countryside, certain Western scholars have begun to search in China for the elements of continuity that survived communism. Vivien Shue’s recent book, The Reach of the State, is a good example. But as Jonathan Unger has demonstrated, finding such continuities has turned out to be difficult. Communist did change the Chinese countryside dramatically. The villages that Su Xiaokang knew in Henan were not traditional villages:

Rather they were communities that had been turned over, not only in their material foundations such as architecture and agricultural methods, but also in the nature of the connections they maintained with the worlds of men and gods: the temples and the rites by which collective experience received meaning had vanished; the traditional intermediaries who maintained communication with the political authorities were gone, as were the ancient solidarities of lineage and place.

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57 My discussion here draws extensively on Thoraval, “La tradition révée.”
At best Su's generation encountered a fossilized and to them unintelligible past: a Beijing whose street names (e.g., dong dan from dong dan pailou) are no longer understood, whose temples have been converted to other uses; sometimes there is an explanatory poster near the entrance, but it uses words for which the current generation has no references in their own experience. Their encounter with the West is similarly fossilized. Unless they leave China it comes through reading or through visiting cities such as Shanghai, where large numbers of people exist in architecturally Western surroundings. But as Thoraval puts it, they are “squatters rather than real inhabitants,” for no connection exists between the civilization that created their setting and the one in which they live.  

The May Fourth generation could claim that it knew both “tradition” and “modernity” firsthand. The contemporary generation, by contrast, can make no such claim. They are trapped in a double bind. It is the unintelligibility of the Communist world they inhabit without the benefit of a living ideology to connect them to it that drives them to consider tradition. But tradition is even more alien and unintelligible than their immediate world. For them to criticize (or to praise) the chuantong requires first an effort of the imagination to construct some version of that chuantong.

Not surprisingly, then, Heshang is less than satisfactory to anyone who has studied Chinese history. It is an overwrought and incoherent mélange: it treats us to snippets of Marx on the Asiatic mode of production, Hegel on the influence of geography on history, Joseph Needham on Chinese science, K.C. Chang on the origins of Chinese civilization, Jin Guantao on China's social “superstability” (chaowendingxing), and the like. Much of it is less than totally accurate. The Yellow River, for example, was not the cradle of Chinese civilization, and even if we do accept some idea about “riverine” cultures, what about the Yangzi? It often draws on scientifically dubious sources even when reputable ones are available. But it has an undeniable power, derived very largely from its use of myth and symbol to present its message.

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59 Thoraval, "La tradition rêvée," p. 22.
60 Ibid., pp. 23–24.
61 This is particularly true of its preference for Xie Xuanjun's theories of myth (see below), which are preferred to the works of Yuan Ke (1916–). See Thoraval, "La tradition rêvée," n. 24.
likewise he cannot understand the present he knows physically because he rejects the Communist ideology, which alone gives it meaning. In the first case he confronts something (tradition) talked about but not known, in the other something known (the present), but for which no interpretative vocabulary yet exists. The result is his retreat (so unlike the crystalline rationalism of some of the May Fourth intellectuals) into myths and symbols to make his own points. Su’s ideological adversaries are no better off; they are reduced to reviving moribund campaigns (Lei Feng), revamping empty slogans, and making transparent and futile attempts to enlist the impoverished symbolic vocabulary for their own purposes.

Such problems have been evident in the reaction to Heshang, which we will examine as it touches the portrayal of the Great Wall. Much initial comment was equivocal. In January 1989 the Renmin ribao published an article that began by quoting the fragment from Lu Xun mentioned above. The reading adopted was very narrow: Lu Xun was not saying something about Chinese people or Chinese culture in general; he was simply criticizing the “warlord” government in Beijing for relying on the “old culture” for support. Was there a broader point? Yes: the Great Wall was the product of two or more thousand years of work, and the Chinese culture that the wall symbolized was therefore “one of change and development.” The wall had guaranteed China’s survival and by doing so had created the opportunity for development. Its significance was that it was both fixed and changing, as was Chinese culture itself. If we were repairing the wall today, the article asked, would we use old methods? No. Chinese culture was the same. To develop it must first survive, then be enriched by modernization.

A few weeks later the same newspaper published another article balancing the good and bad of the wall. The wall had a tragic and bloody history: terrible battles had been fought along it. It was furthermore a symbol of isolation and of cultural stupidity, reflecting the Chinese people’s desire for security. But it was also the only human construction visible from the moon. Chinese

65 Also the strange silence of Chinese artists in general—consider films such as Yellow Earth or Red Sorghum that portray a great deal, but say very little.

Representing China loved that myth because it suggested that their wall, despite its great antiquity, could still hold its own in the age of interplanetary travel.

The Tiananmen massacre, however, changed the nature of this debate. The old warlord Wang Zhen (1908–) helped lead the charge, stating that the series espoused nothing more than “national nihilism” (minzu xixu zhu).65 On July 19, 1989, the Renmin ribao published an article, written a year earlier but blocked by Zhao Ziyang, violently denouncing the series as a “funeral dirge” that wanted to bury the Chinese people and negate the historical role of the Chinese Communist Party while serving as a choir of praise for occidental culture and the spirit of capitalism.66 A month later Zhao Ziyang’s role in suppressing the article originally was specifically condemned.67

Regarding the wall itself, another article in the same month spoke of the argument in Heshang that it was a symbol of isolation. This was not so: the wall had been built for defense, not to seal China off, and there was no necessary correspondence between wall building and cultural stagnation. Many of the Warring States built walls to defend themselves, and the Han built a wall in Gansu to protect the Silk Road. In neither case were the builders culturally isolated; in fact, the Han walls were arguably symbols of foreign contact. To say that the Ming wall was an attempt to isolate China was also wrong, and here the argument gets into the odd retroactive definitions of China characteristic of the People’s Republic. The Ming themselves called their fortifications “border walls” (bian qiang), but according to contemporary Chinese doctrine these walls were built entirely within Chinese territory and were the product of political conflict between two groups within the Chinese race (Zhonghua minzu, which could also be read as plural), namely the Yuan and the Ming. The Ming walls were also signs of strength. Zhu Yuanzhang built his first border walls at the same time he was attacking Mongols. No matter what skeptics might say, the Great Wall...embodies the firm determination and the heroic spirit of the Chinese race, and it is understandable that it has been listed as one of the wonders of the world. When I heard that the

astronauts upon reaching the moon and looking back at the earth first saw the Great Wall, it naturally produced in me a sense of racial pride (minzu de haogan)... the sort of pride we treasure when we stand among the other races.71

Then, mocking the narration in Heshang, the article continued by wondering why, since the Great Wall and the “Great Wall spirit” contribute to and in no way harm the rejuvenation of China, can’t we sing its praises?72

In October 1989 the Renmin ribao carried a defense of walls in general. These, it began, had come under unprecedented attack in recent months. But China had many kinds of walls—from the walls of family compounds to city walls to the Great Wall itself. To say that they symbolized self-isolation was simply wrong. Xi’an, famous for its city wall, was the terminus of the Silk Road, and without the Han walls in Gansu and beyond, trade with the Middle East and Europe would never have been possible. Walls today are useless military defenses, but they do show something of China’s national spirit. Condemnations of them are distorted and unbalanced.73

In 1990 the articles continued. In January a commentator wrote of how the Great Wall has been pilfered. Stones are used for houses, for pigsty, for toilets. In some places the stone facing of the signal towers has been removed, leaving only the earth core. The great Chinese dragon (Zhonghua julong) is already too miserable to look at. This situation is not hard to understand. Despite the campaign to “love and reconstruct the wall,” many people saw it as a worthless symbol of poverty, seclusion, and backwardness that ought to be torn down. The commentator admits “in recent times China has been more backward than certain countries. But this backwardness is not because of the Great Wall or the culture that it represents.” The first walls were built in the Warring States period, one of flourishing culture. And Qin Shihuang built the great means of communication, the direct road (zhi dao), at the same time he built the wall. To devalue the Great Wall (bianhui changcheng) is part of the total rejection of national culture and consciousness some have made in recent years. People don’t want only to destroy the wall; they want to scatter the Chinese race and become citizens of the world (guoji gongmin). This is insane; the only sound way forward is to build on tradition.74

Then in February came a short piece, beginning with the astronauts and the pride every Chinese felt when they saw the wall from the moon (which of course they did not), that showed how the stakes have been rising. For Sima Qian the wall embodied the antithesis of virtuous civilian rule as exemplified by the ancient sage Yao (d. 2258 B.C.E.). Thus a poem by Jiang Zhu of the Song speaks of the magnificence of Qin Shihuang but concludes that all of it, including the wall, is worth nothing compared to the virtue of Yao. As the commentator explains, the message is that the man of literature is superior to the man of war. But after Tiananmen, it seems, the commentator is not so sure. Each dynasty in history has its own material basis, and thus we know that Qin was in some sense more advanced than Yao. Furthermore, if the Song were so great, he asks, how could the Jurchens have conquered them? Qin Shihuang’s culture was superior to Yao’s, and his wall protected it from the attacks of its inferiors.

At this point the commentary becomes genuinely menacing. National nihilism is just one step away from treason.75 The attack on the Great Wall in Heshang is not only a manifestation of national nihilism, but it also clearly reveals the authors’ insane plot to use Western culture to reconstruct China. What is the answer? To build a new Great Wall of the culture and spirit of the new era. Once that sure defense has been created, then China’s economic reconstruction and the four modernizations will be able to advance even better.76

These examples make clear that as has happened with other public symbols, the significance of the Great Wall for Chinese has changed in the last several years. The most dramatic example of the process is Tiananmen Square, one of the “miracles” of the Great Leap Forward, its ensemble of Great Hall, monumental stele, history museum, and so forth presenting to Chinese and visitor alike New China’s sense of itself. All that changed in June 1989. From now on, no matter how carefully it is scrubbed, Tiananmen

72 Ibid.
Square will be remembered above all as the site of a massacre.

The same shift has occurred, although more gradually, with the Great Wall. It has always been, as the current terminology puts it, a "contested" symbol. Chinese were imbued with traditional moral values that scorned it until recently, but since the seventeenth century more materially minded Westerners have rated it both wonder and symbol of Chinese culture. In the early twentieth century some Chinese (interestingly, mostly on the left) began to adopt it as a symbol of patriotism and national resistance. Later when the Maoist symbolic order collapsed, the wall was again pressed into service. This time both government and people seemed at one. The people felt the wall was an authentic symbol: after all, it long antedated the regime. The regime liked it because it worked and because foreigners loved it.

Students of symbolic order and ritual usually shrink from talking about the meanings of the objects they study. One looks at behavior, not at content. In a sense, the whole effort of such study is to explain how consciousness (not ideas) is constructed and manipulated.77 Here the Chinese experience is fascinating, for while the wall itself is massive and the ritual of visiting it a part of the itinerary of Chinese and Western tourists alike, the winner in the contest for the wall described above must be its moral significance. The wall of Qin Shihuang disappeared millennia ago, but it lived on in the literary and folk traditions because of its moral power. Literati never ceased to excoriate Qin Shihuang; generations of simple peasants kept alive the story of Meng Jiangnù because of what it said about China’s might or power, but rather because of its lessons about the moral worth and force of a single individual, even when confronted with the greatest of all tyrants.

In the twentieth century the wall presented itself to the Chinese as a unique candidate for possible conversion to a physical monument in the Western style. Such a process even seemed to be working successfully in the 1970s and early 1980s. In retrospect we can see that this success was largely owed to the wall’s comparative authenticity and the perception among Chinese that it had been wronged in the Cultural Revolution.

But even during the Maoist period, the wall never entirely lost its potency as a moral symbol. As early as the Hundred Flowers campaign, one “rightist” had criticized the Communist technique of control through mass movements. “Since 1952,” he was quoted as saying, “campaign has succeeded campaign, each one leaving behind a Great Wall in its wake, a wall which estranges one man from another.” Similar sentiments fill the poem written in 1971 by Huang Xiang, “Confessions of the Great Wall,” in which the wall stands for “the web of controls that…inhibited every Chinese, making him or her belong to a ‘unit’; confining him or her to one place, denying the freedom to travel to the next country, let alone to a neighbouring country. It was the repression that cut Chinese off from each other’s thoughts and feelings, the censorship that cut them off from what was happening in other lands.”78

Later in the 1970s came Mao Zedong’s campaign to identify himself with a rehabilitated Qin Shihuang. Articles in the press eulogized both despots, and tremendous hoopla was associated with the discovery in Xi’an of the army of terracotta warriors outside the Qin emperor’s tomb. But as Mao pressed his self-identification with Qin Shihuang, the popular tradition that for two thousand years had condemned the first emperor was forced into new life. We have already mentioned the story of Meng Jiangnù. When Mao compared himself to Qin Shihuang, the story willy-nilly became subversive: even to speak of Meng Jiangnù was implicitly to criticize the chairman, and the press was filled with denunciations of her. Many Chinese still remember being forced, as primary school students, to write long and unintelligible political criticisms of a story they all knew and loved.79

When a government recognized as tyrannical began, like Qin Shihuang, to link itself to the wall, the old moral dynamics of the Chinese tradition stirred into operation, and the symbol changed its valence. Today a pseudoscientific critique has been added to that moral critique. As the wall was increasingly impressed into the armory of official patriotism, people both ordinary and educated reasserted its traditional significance, now confirmed by the very effort to co-opt it: as a symbol of oppression and futility, embraced by an oppressive and futile government. Perhaps this shared sense of public morality is a major component of China’s cultural identity; observers earlier in the century, such as John Dewey (1859–1952), suggested as much.80

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77 For a trenchant critique of this approach, see Benjamin I. Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).


80 John Dewey, “The Student Revolt in China,” New Republic, August 6, 1919,
Cultural nationalism is usually treated as a fairly straightforward process in which aspects of a culture are assembled for purposes of cultural legitimation. Often the society in which it is identified lacks a strong cultural tradition. In Asia, however, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese states have existed for a very long time. This fact makes cultural nationalism a much more complex phenomenon there. The past is so real that the slate can never be clean. To construct a cultural nationalism (such as Maoism) that negates or ignores the past is both to neglect and to compete with something having its own reality and power. But the attempt to embrace that past on terms other than its own is, as the Great Wall example shows, equally risky. Even a clean slate, however, does not solve the problem, for the whole enterprise of cultural nationalism requires some idea of a past, or a tradition, or a culture, and those that are genuinely imagined (as opposed to being simply imposed) are every bit as difficult to control as those that have been genuinely inherited.

For the People’s Republic of China, neither the attempt to negate and replace traditional culture nor the more recent attempt to embrace it have worked. Official attempts to reconstruct a cultural nationalism are falling afoul both of a deeply held sense of national identity and morality based in tradition and of a constructed, scientific, and modernizing cultural critique of that culture derived from the rejection of Maoism by the generation of the Cultural Revolution.

CHAPTER THREE

Cultural Nationalism and Chinese Modernity

ANN ANAGNOST

For the last hundred years, the encounter between “modernity” and “tradition” has dominated Chinese intellectual discourse, setting the terms of cultural and political debate. But both these terms have proven to be unstable categories caught up in the historical and dialectical process of defining a polity that is both “Chinese” and “modern.” The chapters by Prasenjit Duara and Arthur Waldron dealing respectively with moments early and late in this process are juxtaposed here almost as parentheses framing a historical durée. Duara describes a moment when the unitary state in its “modern” guise was in the process of becoming, but the outcome of which was by no means certain. He reclaims for us here an alternative vision of the nation that had not only a discursive reality, but an organizational and military presece as well. Waldron describes a more recent moment in which an oppositional narrative of the nation found a brief opening that was then closed by the unitary state with all its murderous force. The two moments eerily mirror each other in that both evoke the possibility of a meaningful dialogue between alternative visions of the “nation,” a possibility that belies the assumption that the failure of China to attain a truly “modern” form has something to do with the cognitive limits of Chinese “culture” itself.

Duara’s chapter tracks a failure among certain early-twentieth-century reformers to displace a discursive field. The liansheng zizhi movement challenged the notion that China’s strength

p. 18, comments on the May Fourth Movement: In no other country “could moral and intellectual force accomplish so quickly and peaceably what was effected in China in the last five or six weeks.”

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