

**Post-modernist/ Post-colonialist Nationalism and the Historiography of China:  
The Paradox of the Happy Minnows**  
後現代/後殖民主義的民族主義和中國史學：  
濠梁上儻魚的悖論

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**關鍵詞：**亞洲價值、正派、啟蒙運動、霸權、現代化、多元現代化、民族主義、他者、後殖民主義、後現代主義、合理性

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## Abstract

The title of this paper is taken from *Zhuang-zi*, who was an optimistic skeptic, constantly at play with paradoxes. Of them, the most famous is his debate with his friend, Hui Shi, about how a human could know that the minnows were happy, dashing to and fro in the stream under the bridge. The minnows were happy, perhaps, but were more likely laughing at the confidence of the two apparently intelligent thinkers. Both of them believed that they had the answer.

The post-modernist would also laugh at the same kind of self-confidence that there is an absolute answer to every question, and that the answer should be at once universal and logical. Whereas the post-modernist position often leads to so-called “culture wars”, its stance is actually one that is inquisitive, humble, forward-looking, and democratic. Unfortunately, when such attitudes are taken over to interpret the “other”, the “other” often uses the open attitude to subvert and to seek for hegemony. They do so by way of constructing a new narrative, masquerading it as not merely one of many, but the unique, way to “truth”. Post-colonialist historiography has powerfully demonstrated how this strategy can work.

In recent historiography of China, the same tendency has worked to the advantage of the Chinese nationalist historians, an advantage the old argument that “China was different or unique” often was not able to achieve. In short, the old nationalist historiography often used the post-modernist and post-colonialist relativism to seek for prominence, to claim its legitimate position of the “other”, and then as first among the equals. Some Western historians of China are also criticizing the modernist project, proclaiming that the historiography of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its linear time concept and idea of progress, has not only distorted the understanding of China’s past, but also prevented the Chinese from finding value and meaning in their own history. The post-modernist project paradoxically creates a situation that is actually preventing us from seeing the true picture of China’s past. But then this after all is what post-modernists want, is this not? The minnows should know better.

## 摘要

本文題目取材自《莊子》〈秋水篇〉中莊子和惠施的對話。莊子是一個懷疑主義者，而惠施則認為自己是一個理性主義的思想家。兩人都認為自己的立場纔是正確的，不管濠江的儵魚是怎麼想的。

後現代主義以及後殖民主義的思想本質，是希望可以讓各家各派的學說得到平等的對待，或至少讓弱勢的學說、理論或信仰得到應有的重視。不過後現代主義，尤其是後殖民主義的思想，有時也主張應該讓所謂的「他者」起來和主流的思想進行所謂「文化戰爭」，因此這兩派的學說在理論上隱含著一種「以我代彼」或「以彼代我」的危險。

在中國近代史的研究上，很早以來便已經有中國歷史進展是獨特的這樣的觀點，但是強調獨特性會不會正好像後現代主義的思想一樣，把「他者」獨特化起來，以致把人類歷史經驗裏可能的共同性給取消了呢？會不會要中國人只擁抱自己的文化特質，而不斷地與其他文化進行鬥爭呢？

有些學者強烈主張西方的歷史觀和國家理論不應該拿來解釋中國歷史，更不應該拿來作為近代中國建構一個現代國家的指導方針。他們主張現代化理論不能隨便搬到其他國家或社會，他們又同時強調中國歷史和文化的獨特性，於是結論為中國近代的歷史經驗不是用西方的觀念所能解釋或改造。

後現代主義學者批判西方啓蒙時代締造出來的種種現代價值，宣稱這些價值只是西方的主流價值，接受他們就等於是西化，或者是變成了十八世紀思想的奴隸。推廣言之，現代化等於是西方化、等於接受一些已經不適用的偏頗的西方思想。這個說法不一定不合理，但是它卻讓一些主張中國文化的未來不應該取法西方的人得到了幻想的空間，讓他們在精神上受到了奇怪的鼓舞：認為中國要的是自己發展自己該走的路，而不要或不必大量採用西方的價值，特別是啓蒙時代發展出來的民主、科學的思想，這些東西不適合用來改造中國。這種帶有強烈民族主義色彩的論述，正好和後現代（特別是後殖民）主義的反「啓蒙」思想有相通之處，讓許多人因之主張中國必須起來反對「啓蒙」。在中國這樣的主張大約是開始於八〇年代，與後現代的反啓蒙思想大致同時，於是在中國，反啓蒙的想法如虎添翼，蔚然成風。其實這只是一種保守的懼外思想。

前一陣子流行的「亞洲價值」的理論，它雖然是站在文化多元的假設上來發展其論述，但是卻被用來替「他者」掩飾其獨特性的主張，以致幫忙他們繼續採行獨特的政策或文化信念。這種看似後現代的論述，其實是前現代的，只是用了後現代思想的用語以及它價值相對的特色，來抗拒一些人類可以共同接受的價值罷了。

本文討論了當代中、美數位近代史或中國史家的理論，目的不在批評他們，而是希望當代中國人可以早早跳出民族主義的框架，以便對學術的客觀研究有真正的領會和心得，進而利用價值的相對觀點來檢視中國自有的思想，採取合理的(reasonable)、正派的(decent)態度，把它們放在普世的價值系譜或格局裏不斷地檢索，這樣才能對中國的歷史和文化得到真正的、理性的、以及客觀的了解。

後現代或後殖民的理論不應該只是提倡相對性、混淆是非，讓各樣的理論或學說各是其是、各非其非而已。換言之，不應當像莊子及惠施一樣。其實他們兩個人都不知道濠梁下的儵魚究竟快不快樂，只有那魚兒在那裏暗暗地笑著。

## Introduction

One of the most interesting but profoundly intriguing stories in the *Zhuang-zi* is his debate with his friend, Hui Shi, the logician, over how one could know whether the minnows in the River Hao under the bridge on which they were strolling were happy:

Zhuang-zi and Hui Shi were strolling one day on the bridge over the River Hao. Zhuang-zi said: "Look how the minnows dart hither and thither where they will. Such is the pleasure that fish enjoy." Hui Shi said: "You are not a fish. How do you know what gives pleasure to fish?" Zhuang-zi said, "You are not I. How do you know that I do not know what gives pleasure to fish?" Hui Shi said: "If because I am not you, I cannot know whether you know, then equally because you are not a fish, you cannot know what gives pleasure to fish. My argument still holds." Zhuang-zi said: "Let us go back to where we started. You asked me how I knew what gives pleasure to fish. But you already knew how I knew it when you asked me. You knew that I knew it by standing here on the bridge at Hao."<sup>1</sup>

The basic lesson of this story, as Zhuang-zi obviously wanted us to know, is that we either know or do not know another person. In Zhuang-zi's argument, he assumed that we could know, logically or intuitively, each other or the feelings of a minnow. Zhuang-zi believed that his position was actually shared by Hui Shi, but Hui Shi assumed that knowledge had to be logical, and that a human could not logically know the feeling of non-human creatures, such as a minnow. Zhuang-zi was consistent in his denial of the usefulness of rational thinking, and believed that knowledge was intuitive. His answer to Hui Shi was purely based on that fundamental belief. Each one believed that he had the right answer: the other was wrong or at least could not be proven to be right.

The minnows were laughing in the River Hao. The minnows are still laughing today, amid the post-modernist/post-colonialist "logic" or "intuition".

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Zhuang-zi*, the "Autumn Water" (*qiu-shui*) chapter. The translation is that of Arthur Waley's, in his *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, no date), p. 7.

This paper will address the *simple* issue of knowledge as a universally accepted property that all could share equally and equally satisfactorily. Particularly when the knowledge concerned is historical, this should be perhaps even simpler.

### **When not All Knowledge is Historical**

All problems concerning post-modernism arise from the fact that people try to situate knowledge in time. For many of them, historical changes are the inevitable conditions of every possible view about nature and the human. Under such circumstances, knowledge as such loses its “objective” criterion. All post-modernists cheer such a realization; the logician, however, does not know what to do about it. All of a sudden, he is shut up. Even a human body, or the pair of peasant shoes depicted by Van Gogh, can be meaningful only in its temporal context.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that all hermeneutical efforts are not more than attempts to imagine the reality. This awareness of a historicist approach to history, of what Jameson calls “simulacrum”, is tragic, to say the least. But there have been two proposals for solution.

The first is that we continue to think and believe that there is historicity, that history is not fiction. This is an easy way out, because by doing so we are “rescuing” history from perennial changes. We are dangerously proposing that all knowledge is not historical. That is to say, not all histories are contemporary history. Scientific precision has been cheered as the answer to the historicist onslaught of knowledge.

Actually, not even historicists in the nineteenth century argued that all knowledge was historical, let alone mere imagination. Nobody was willing to go as far as to claim that there was no reality, not even later-day historicists like Croce and Collingwood. Only Ortega y Gasset claimed that there was only history and no nature, but then Ortega y Gasset was not speaking about reality. The historicist strategy of distinguishing human sciences and natural sciences has successfully exorcised the anxiety that historical relativism would inform both sciences. This is to say that, for them, relativism and uncertainty about the ultimate truth (or even simply the real) is confined to the human science, and that

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<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

one needs not be worried by any possible loss of objective truth in the natural sciences. The post-modernist anxiety is the anxiety of historicism placed upside down. Therefore, many critics of post-modernism are now saying that, for all of the powerful attacks on the Enlightenment master-narrative, especially its notions of rationality and objective truth, there is after all a fundamental truth and a unity that is behind all things, history included. This is comforting, but nobody has yet proven to us (me) what that master-narrative is.

The second answer is that we give up historicity. All knowledge is not historical. However, having held this as a position, one cannot deny that there remains a true feeling of hollowness, a lack of unity, at least in the realm of human affairs where relativism is and continues to be the order of the day. What is left for philosophers to do is to argue for a kind of post-modernist ethics. In Isaiah Berlin's words, what is left is decency, which, like Prometheus unbound, could help bring about a sense of dignity and even the will to live.<sup>3</sup> Berlin's answer has recently been shared by Stephan Toulmin, whose concern is the recognition that human sciences are faced with a crisis, and that only "reason" is the solution.<sup>4</sup> By reason, he really means "reasonableness" or "a reasonable attitude", which obviously has a social and humanist overtone. This second answer is like, as the Chinese would say, an "echo from a vast empty valley" (*kong-gu hui-yin*), that is to say, an answer from a "brave new world".

The source of inspiration for both comes from reflections and experiences of recent European and American intellectual history, which, with its material success and accompanied complacency resulting in the rise of the idea of progress, has dominated the self-image of the later-day capitalist society. In the first proposal, one sees a Fukuyamaian optimism that history has ended. In this kind of articulation, truth in the form of democracy, liberty and capitalist economy and management has indeed overcome historical skepticism, and has proven that the modern Western values are correct. While I think this is a rather attractive way out, I still doubt if the end of history has indeed arrived, and that "history" is thus rescued. The second answer to relativism is also firmly grounded in

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> His *Return to Reason* is published by Harvard University Press, 2001. See also Thomas Docherty's introduction to his (ed.) *Postmodernism, a Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 1-32, in that Docherty argues that the ultimate dilemma for the post-modernist is "the search for a just politics, or the search for just a politics". See p. 27.

modern Western historical experiences, shaped by such as the First World War and more importantly the Second World War and the Holocaust. Despair and anxiety are the fact of human life, and there seems to be no salvation. In a peculiar way, the answer to the anxiety and even epistemological nihilism remains modernist or even pre-modernist: the will to live “reasonably” or at least the belief that salvation can only come from moral courage sounds like that they still remain in the fold of Kant’s thinking. They hardly seem to have moved beyond his second *Critique*. I wonder if “rationality”, broadly defined, or “reasonableness” provides all the answers, much as I would like it to. Where is the position for ethics or morality?

If space is also an ingredient in our thinking about historical relativism, then post-colonialism has used it intelligently. While different times develop different values, different regions or civilizations also uphold different values and use different processes of legitimation to justify their own uniqueness. Post-colonialism is a spatial proclamation of historicist and even post-modernist position. Recent interests in post-colonialism are closely related to post-modernist concerns for the “other”, but here the “other” is by and large geographically defined. It is an imperialist agenda reversed or at least subverted. Post-colonialism has been indeed useful in getting more people to see how colonialism had created injustice in the colonized regions, and to realize that now is the time to return to the pre-colonial culture to restore its integrity and to depict its beauty and originality. However, not all colonial experiences are as radically negative as much post-colonial literature would have us believe. Many recent studies of literature or history during the colonial periods in East Asia provide interesting clues to how post-colonial studies are complex and methodologically pluralistic.

Post-colonial theories affirm the findings of post-modernism, that moral choices are variegated, and that the diversity of time, that is, history, is also a diversity of space. The post-colonial struggle for historical revision is an attempt to reiterate the spatial diversity.

The trouble with the notion of diversity is whether it is also a truth informing the entire human knowledge. Post-colonialist theorists have never intruded into the territory of natural science, even though post-modernists have. The post-modernist attempts to relegate natural science to not more than reflections (and perhaps even only refractions) of the variegated “imaginings” of the scientists have caused great controversy, though I think they will not succeed. This is because the ultimate salvation of the post-modernist stance will come only

from history, and history, as a temporal “science” is fundamentally different from natural science. The latter relies on a-historical universalism as its foundation, whereas historical knowledge can only hope that its salvation comes from its own justification as a true knowledge, or, put it simply, the end of time.<sup>5</sup>

Amidst diversity and even despair over the existence and destiny of humankind, there remains “rational” natural science, which gives solace to humans: not all knowledge is historical. Natural science becomes the fundamental “human rights”, on which the humankind continue to survive. The problem is that humans need and aspire to a knowledge of history.

To conclude these discussions on post-modernism and post-colonialism, one sees the following implications. First, the diversity following the post-modernist consciousness will now remain forever as a fundamental fact of human existence, and this fact is also spatial, as post-colonial theories have affirmed. Second, all values are equally valid, and that there inevitably will be “culture wars”. Different places will take turns to dominate at different times. Third, for now there is no way that any one could pass out judgment on which master-narrative is ultimately correct. And finally, everybody is his own historian, or as the author of the *Judges* would say: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25).

Fortunately not all knowledge is historical. For that which is historical, the truth will come only at the end of time, when everything stopped being historical. This may sound like blasphemy, but it is not. We shall examine this in the following, within the context of comparative Chinese historiography.

## The Uniqueness of China and Chinese History

I have often joked, saying that the secret strategy of sinologists is to continuously proclaim the uniqueness of Chinese civilization or history, and to stress that it was so fundamentally different from Western experiences that therefore only the sinologists understand it. The idea of uniqueness idea is a subversive one, because it goes against universalism. It goes against David

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<sup>5</sup> I may sound like a Hegelian here, but I am really only talking about the epistemological possibility, not Hegelian notion of world-spirit or Idea. From a linguistic philosophical approach, Arthur Danto argues that it is the inadequacy of human language that dictates that the human knowledge of history would only come when that language finally comes to grips with itself, and that will come only at the end of time.

Hume's important contention that there was a universal human nature. It is important to note that this belief is by no means new; it has been here for quite a long time, and pre-dates the rise of post-modernism as an intellectual force. I shall give only one immediate example. In Jonathan Spence's famous articulation about how China could not be changed by any other than themselves, he has this to say: "[the Westerners] were confident. They were sure that their own civilization whatever its shortcomings had given them something valid to offer, something that China lacked. They had the right because they had the ability, the faith, and the drive. They were, quite literally, on the top of the world. As they changed, so the world changed, and China with it. That was the way things were. For the Chinese to protest against this made no sense since it was self-evident. One might as well protest the tide's rise or the sun's light. Many Westerners still share these assumptions....But for China, ...[they are now] seeking to prove the validity of a Chinese world view through the sophistication of Chinese expertise."<sup>6</sup> Spence was not trying to formulate a grand theory, but his fundamental assumption is that China had no need to join the Western universe of values. The narrative is a-historical, assuming that development of science and technology in China would naturally render him right that the Chinese could achieve "sophistication of Chinese expertise." The question is whether there is such a thing as "Chinese expertise". Spence did not say what it was. Actually he seems to be suggesting that it was modern science and technology.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Spence evidently believed that there is a cultural realm of China, which Westerners would never actually succeed in shaping or transforming. China was not changeless, Spence claims, and the Chinese were about to use "their expertise" to uphold their world view very soon. Spence wrote this in 1969. Three years later, President Richard Nixon would visit China, partly acknowledging that China indeed has her own cultural logic.

By "Chinese expertise" did Spence mean modern Western science and technology? This is debatable, because science and technology is a complex issue. As many Western historians of China have often argued, *a propos* Albert

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Spence, *To Change China* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1969), p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> I cannot imagine that there were other things that could make up this "Chinese expertise". On the other hand, the Chinese did use their expertise (viz., Confucian ethics, rites and rulership) with sophistication and prevailed over their nomadic conquerors, despite the latter's impressive military prowess. If I should emphasize this view too much, however, I will sound like an early twentieth-century Chinese Boxer.

Einstein: China did not develop science, and we should actually be surprised if China had. This position has been now forcefully challenged, because, thanks to Joseph Needham and generations of historians of Chinese science, we are now able to point out that the Chinese had developed a rich scientific tradition earlier than many other nations. On the other hand, the problem of affirming that China had a “science” tradition is to obscure the uniqueness of the Chinese civilization: what were the characteristics of the Chinese civilization that are not modern? Many sinologists are skeptical that Needham’s question, why did modern science not arise in China, could ever be answered; because they believe that the question was misconceived. It fails to take into account of the uniqueness of the Chinese culture: its quest for a harmonious society, a moral encomium of stable life for all people, and an economic realm of equitable distribution, instead of competition. These ideals came first in China’s quest for a perfect and happy life. Science and technology came only after them. These ideals are not in accord with the fundamental character of the modern science that created the competitive world order and capitalist way of life. China is different.

So, Spence’s assumption that there would be a “sophisticated Chinese expertise” and even a “Chinese world view” becomes problematic, if by “Chinese expertise” he means science and technology. Clearly, if the Chinese people are to make contributions in these areas, then these contributions are not “Chinese expertise”. They have not been the priority concern of the Chinese people and their leaders, and Spence could not mean them. After all, the Chinese, with their different concerns and “world views”, had no real use of Western science, even if they happened to have made various important contributions in it. On the other hand, if he does not mean “science and technology”, and that therefore the Westerners cannot really have any thing to teach the Chinese, it is very difficult to imagine what the “Chinese expertise” could be, and much less why the Chinese could persuade the other people to accept their “world view”. Spence may be right in saying that it is a unique Western trait to want to “help” other peoples. Obviously other peoples have their own ways of helping themselves and have no use of the Western assistance. In short, the perceived “backwardness” of the Chinese people did not arise from China’s unique and different world view. It was their own choice.

In a similar vein, some interpreters of China’s scientific tradition prefer to argue that no Westerners, with their own world views and intellectual assumptions, could actually offer the Chinese any help in China’s search for “moderni-

zation”.<sup>8</sup> This is of course based on the assumption that China’s history and culture are unique and distinctly different from those in the West. A look at the history of the introduction of Western science and technology into China during the nineteenth century, shows that most Western efforts failed, whereas the Chinese people seem perfectly able to learn and develop their own “expertise”, especially in the area of banking and textile industries,<sup>9</sup> which had made significant “progress”. In other words, the uniqueness of China was not to China’s benefit. Actually, the Chinese are equipped with the ability to handle Western ideas perfectly. Many historians of modern China hold this opinion, despite their lip-service to the thesis of the uniqueness of the Chinese culture.

I use “progress” with caution, because this is hardly the right word in a comparative study on historiography: the word is loaded with connotations, and it is hardly neutral if one uses “progress” to describe the historical experience of a people at a certain time-space. On the other hand, it is a concept that has been lurking in the mind of many a sinologist. How is it possible that one could compare China with any other nation, without having a criterion, let alone a standpoint? All comparisons eventually lead to unfortunate but inevitable conclusions based on ranking, so as to judge which is more advanced or has made a greater “progress”. While we know that this is not a real comparison, it is difficult not to engage in it. The only way out of this unhappy situation has often been to forfeit the notion of linear progress. It is true that most Western sinologists have come to this conclusion. My use of “progress” is thus neither a happy nor a legitimate one. But then what good it is to say simply that China is different?

The emphasis of China’s uniqueness goes hand in hand with the tendency among some recent interpreters of Chinese history to award equal footing to the Chinese experience, placing China on the par with the West. This may sound

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Elman, “Rethinking the 20th Century Denigration of Traditional Chinese Science and Medicine in the 21st Century,” paper presented in the conference on “The Interaction and Confluence of Chinese and Non-Chinese Civilizations,” organized by Himalaya Foundation and The Center for the Study of East Asian Civilizations of National Taiwan University, November 1-2, 2004, in Prague, Czech Republic.

<sup>9</sup> Lilian Li (*China’s Silk Trade: Traditional Industry in the Modern World, 1842-1937*, Council of East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1981), and Sherman Cochran (*Encountering Chinese Networks: Western, Japanese, and Chinese Corporations in China, 1880-1937*, University of California Press, 2000) are two examples. They have made original contributions to interpreting modern Chinese social and economic histories, showing that the Chinese actually were doing very well in the areas listed above.

much like the arguments of some post-modernist thinkers, but it actually is incorrect to characterize the post-modernist position as espousing relativity of values. However, post-modernist thinkers are prone to such accusations. The sinologist's dilemma is quite akin to this unhappy post-modernist position. It is just that few historians of China have openly stated or examined this scholarly or even intellectual ambivalence.

I pointed out above that sinologists have arrived at this position long before the post-modernists did: to emphasize the Chinese uniqueness, it is necessary to accept that different civilizations make different contributions and that all of them are equally necessary for the good of the world, if not necessarily equally important.

### **The Chinese Uniqueness and the Historiography on China**

The notion of the Chinese uniqueness has significant implications, and the most evident of them is methodological. It posits China as an "other" and therefore had/has a narrative that is fundamentally and qualitatively different from other national (cultural) narratives. The habitual use of transliterated Chinese words or phrases among sinologists is common enough, and rightfully so most of the time, but some historians may go as far as to resuscitate an archaic and long unused word, to express an idea that presumably has no English (or other Western linguistic) equivalent.<sup>10</sup> Doing so creates a comfortable space for delineating the extraordinary nature or characteristics of the Chinese tradition.

The current popularity in criticizing the Hegelian misunderstanding of Chinese history, as represented notably by Prasenjit Duara is instructive enough. Any one who goes back to the 1950's to check the textbooks and other writings on China will easily find that Hegel's notion, China being out of the arena of "World Spirit" and its history "unchanging", was criticized regularly. China historians often pointed out that his position was unacceptable, and that it could not be taken as a point of departure for understanding Chinese history. Many books read as if they were written explicitly to disprove Hegel. Duara conducts a more

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<sup>10</sup> I have here one excellent example, that of the use of *aporia*. This word could have been easily replaced by dilemma or predicament. See Prasenjit Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), p. 27. The most commonly seen problem is the arbitrary expansion of the parameter of meaning of a Chinese word or expression.

systematic examination of Hegel's historical philosophy,<sup>11</sup> equating it to the popularity of linear concepts of time in modern Western historiography,<sup>12</sup> and the rise of modern nationalism. The Hegelian state is for Duara a misconceived model for China. The linear concept of time was also wrongly implanted in the Chinese mind when they were imagining their new (read, modern) nation-state. In fact, the linear concept of time is flawed, capable of "expos[ing] the uncertainty of a voyage into the future without return," according to Duara. "I would argue that traditional, cyclical conceptions of history which mark or emphasize return are not only alternative ways of constructing continuity, but also produce less anxiety than linear histories," says he.<sup>13</sup> Although Duara does not dwell on the problems of Hegel's contention that Chinese history is changeless, his critique on linear conception of time actually provides a metaphysical basis to reject the Hegelian notion that China had been out of the arena of the World Spirit searching to realize itself. In other words, he has said it with a philosophical depth that the earlier sinologists, based on pure (often also simplistic) historical research, were not able to do. In general, however, one cannot deny that there was continuity in "metaphysics" between the earlier sinologists and Duara. Let me elaborate.

My elaboration begins with the question: how does this rejection of the Hegelian view reconcile with the often-quoted contention that China or China's history was unique? I think Duara typically provides a useful answer, though that answer is rather convoluted. His strategy is to distinguish the History (simply put, History is the Enlightenment version of history, a master-narrative of history created by the Enlightenment) from various histories, of which China

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<sup>11</sup> The English translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* that Duara used is the one by J. Sibree. He could have used the more recent translation by Robert Hartman (*Reason in History: a General Introduction to the Philosophy of History by G. F. W. Hegel*, New York: MaMillan, 1987), and take note of the important corrective made by Shlomo Avineri on Sibree's incorrect understanding of Hegel's "die germanische Welt", which Sibree translated into "the German world". See Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (London & New York: Cambridge, 1972). For "the Germanic world" which is Avineri's translation, see p. 228. Hegel's political philosophy, in the eyes of Avineri, remains more a liberal than an inspirational advocate of nationalism.

<sup>12</sup> To use Hegel as a representative of Western linear time conception is somewhat unfortunate, because the tradition goes back a long way. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>13</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, p. 28.

was one. Clearly, the central assumption is that there is a Chinese history that has been fundamentally different from History. In order to understand Chinese history, it is important to reject History, and to “bifurcate” Chinese history, so that the process in which the modern Chinese people re-created their nation in the model of a Historical nation-state could be shown to be different from that of the Western one and that the Chinese effort was a futile one. The process of bifurcating was necessary precisely because the Chinese history could not be understood using the method of History. As much as Duara wishes that his critique is not against Chinese history, but against the Enlightenment History, he may appear to be doing some justice to the Chinese history, as the post-colonialists wish to see. However, the truth is that he was constructing a theory based on his imagined Chinese “difference”, and for that matter “uniqueness”. It is only in making sure that the Chinese historical accounts are appropriately re-imagined that he/we could hope to rescue History from a nation that is being constructed by that History.

The argument above poses an enormous challenge to the readers, especially since Duara introduces the idea of nation which does not seem to me to be directly relevant, except because he is trying to use the nation narratives in modern China to demonstrate his own views. We will soon return to this point. For now, it is necessary to point out that nobody denies that China is different and even unique. The point is how do we measure or describe it. Is it measurable? Can it truly be described?

Duara’s critique on linear conception of time which was the core of the Enlightenment History, is in step with his notion of nationalism, an issue I now pick up. In his articulation, nationalism is a fluid phenomenon, combining different representations over time and space, and is ultimately often defined by “the Other”.<sup>14</sup> In all, there is no unity in the idea of nationalism, and Duara is satisfied that this is actually better. This is similar to his attitude towards “nation-state”, which I referred to above. Simply put, a “nation-state” is not what History makes it to be. There is not a monolithic Chinese nation, and this perhaps is even better, or at least this is the truth or fact.

Nationalism has been a serious matter for the Chinese people over the past one and a half centuries. It has sustained a lot of the so-called misconstrued and

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<sup>14</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, p. 15. A word of caution: in Duara’s eyes, this “cultural” approach was also nothing but a kind of nationalism.

imagined political institutions of China: authoritarianism, abusive politics, repressive totalitarian state, and the like. In Duara's view, the images of modern China, as listed above, were not more than misguided reading of the Chinese history, using the History approach. Fortunately, modern Chinese nationalism, dominated by the desire to modernize, was nonetheless able to use "culture" to combat modernization in the form of the Enlightenment History.<sup>15</sup> This convoluted argument is of course because basically modern Chinese history itself is extremely complex and, worse, is not more than an amalgam of disparate claims and representations; Duara should thus be forgiven for making his exposition so difficult. On the other hand, the modernization project has wasted so much of the Chinese mind in the past century. Most people working to introduce "modernist values" were considered "progressive" in their own days. However, today, fighting for modernization is considered a "conservative" (to read: dated, backward) undertaking. There is no greater irony than this. Modernization is now widely held as not more than "Westernization" and that China should and will have her own "modernization" that is different from the capitalized Modernization. In Modernization, the effort to "modernize" is equal to "Westernize". This is against the trends of history, and thus is behind the times, and "conservative". Could one really use the notion, conservatism, in this way?

Duara makes a distinction, following that of Charlotte Furth, between separatist and supremacist types of conservatism. Both are actually the same, with respect to their attitudes towards modernization: both are opposed to it.<sup>16</sup> The irony is that the post-colonialists, however, not only stressed that the opposition to modernization was not without reason, but actually also promoted the ideals of awarding the "opposition" (to the Modernization project) a rightful space in the historical narrative of modern China. Therefore, sinologists with the Duara torque find Modernization a project to be rejected, and they have post-modernist or post-colonialist theories behind them to justify such a claim.

I am actually not prepared to criticize the conclusion Duara proposed in terms of "bifurcating" Chinese history, but wish merely to point out that post-modernist theory, true to its core belief, can become exceedingly essentialist, stressing only the "uniqueness" or unbridgeable difference, camouflaging itself with such notions as diversity. The post-modernist theorists often award

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<sup>15</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, pp. 207-8, 233.

<sup>16</sup> The use of "separatist" and "supremacist" are mine.

priority to “other” than “diversity”. The “other” regularly becomes the predominant concern, as if one does not hegemonize or prioritize it, then historical imagination or knowledge will be in vain. This actually is even more evident in post-colonialist thinking and writing.

It is my understanding that the original post-modernist position actually neither encourages competing priorities nor promotes hegemonization. At most, it allows diversified priorities. But in its struggle for re-imagining the past, many writers have simply replaced the idea of diversity with that of “re-orientating towards ‘the other’”. Hegemonizing the “other”, however, is thus a double-edged sword, and cuts in both sides. On the one hand, it creates a situation in that all we learn from history is not more than continual reversals of the current consensus. On the other hand, it creates a place from which a self-aggrandizing nationalist narrative comes to the fore constantly to dominate or at least influence the discourse (here to read: modernization). The latter is becoming particularly evident in recent Chinese historical writings, especially among those who have received training in the US. I will not examine them in detail, but rather point out that post-modernist and especially post-colonialist theories have ironically contributed to a peculiarly nationalistic attitude or narrative that is now often seen in Chinese historical writings. “China is so different that it cannot be understood from beyond its own master narrative”; from the discussion above, this development is not at all strange.

### **“Enlightenment” (*Qi-meng*) and its Enemies**

One of the most dominating ideas in recent writings on modern Chinese history is the critique on the idea of the so-called “enlightenment”. This is related particularly to the interpretation of the May Fourth Movement of 1919. This is a movement that had promoted wholesale reevaluation and transvaluation of traditional Chinese culture. It promoted modern science and democracy, and championed the overthrow of Confucianism as the dominating “narrative” in Chinese thinking. Chinese thinkers for a long period of time supported the May Fourth agenda, and have generally considered it a kind of “enlightenment movement”. The word “enlightenment” at the time (1919) had nothing to do with modern Western Enlightenment. Actually, the historical periodization scheme that called the eighteenth century as the age of “Enlightenment” had not become popular even in Western history text books, and so when May Fourth

was labeled as an “enlightenment movement”, it was not intended to mean something similar to the Western Enlightenment, much less Kant’s *Aufklärung*. Actually, Hu Shi (1891-1962), one of the most important literary and intellectual leaders of the movement, compared the period to the European Renaissance.

The idea of “enlightenment” in Chinese Marxist historiography rose up early, and represented intellectual efforts to introduce modern democratic and liberty (especially that of speech and publication) values. The seventeenth century had also been widely called an age of enlightenment, represented by especially Huang Zong-xi (1610-1695), because of the new ideas developed at the time that were very critical of traditional Chinese values.<sup>17</sup>

The association with modern ideas thus became the main thrust of May-fourth exegeses. In over half a century, because of the Western influences, the Chinese had generally accepted that modernization was the way to “wealth and power”, and that it was enlightenment that could provide solutions to “rescuing” the Chinese people from their own history.

Clearly, the May Fourth Movement is a modernist discourse, and reflected an anxiety, an anticipation for a panacea that would save the Chinese people. The discourse lasted for nearly half a century, and despite its lack of metaphysical sophistication in its assessment of Chinese culture, it has remained a powerful narrative, only occasionally attacked by traditionalists, who, however, have little basic training to engage the issues.

By the early 1980’s, however, things started to change. In a very general sense, historians began to equate the May Fourth attempts to modernize China, especially in terms of intellectual skepticism and the promotion of democracy, to the European Enlightenment, when similar ideas were also emerging in Europe. In the early 1980’s, it must be pointed out, there were very few Chinese scholars who knew of post-modernism.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, none were using post-modernist vocabulary, and few would directly question the Enlightenment narrative. Nonetheless, “enlightenment” as a conceptual tool to interpret modern Chinese destiny was now criticized: the Chinese people, they argued, under the influence

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<sup>17</sup> And perhaps because this was when incipient capitalism was appearing in China, and the leading thinkers were reflecting on the new reality, bidding farewell to the previous stage of historical development.

<sup>18</sup> As far as I can ascertain, the first person to write in Chinese about post-modernism is Leo O. Lee of Harvard in the early 1980s. Most of his articles were published in Taiwan newspapers. At the time he was teaching at the University of Chicago.

of the West, were worshipping Western values as gods. That is, May Fourth Chinese thinkers were creating a new religion, worshipping Western deities of liberty, democracy, and so on.<sup>19</sup> In short, Chinese writers of the eighties began a widespread critique on the Chinese enlightenment, and that critique developed at exactly the same time as the post-modernist critique of the European Enlightenment was also rising.<sup>20</sup>

The next step is to explain why the Chinese enlightenment movement failed. Theories are many, and I will not examine them in detail. Suffice it to say that the main thrust of these theories points to the inadequacy of the May Fourth discourse. Some also criticized that there was a theoretical crisis inherent in the May Fourth intellectual agenda. Li Ze-hou said it very well: "We will of course continue to tread the path of the May Fourth, but we should not repeat the May Fourth; nether should we simply keep the May Fourth agenda. This holds the same for our attitudes towards the [Chinese] tradition. Unlike those in the May Fourth times, we should not abandon the tradition, we should only transform the tradition..."<sup>21</sup> Tradition became an existence that could not be exorcised away.<sup>22</sup> While the idea of "transformation", invoking Nietzsche's idea of "transvaluation", reminds readers of the post-modernist position, the May Fourth interpreters were actually using the tradition to explain why the master narrative of the May Fourth contained in itself an "inner trap" (contradiction) that ultimately would bring its own downfall. One interpreter concluded that the May-fourth

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<sup>19</sup> The most forceful advocate of this viewpoint is Zhang Hao, a Harvard-trained modern Chinese historian. Although he was at the time teaching at Ohio State, his Chinese works have had enormous influences on China's young students. He is now teaching in Hong Kong. He was then apparently not very familiar with post-modernist theories, and therefore acknowledges the theoretical inspiration from Leo O. Lee. Actually, Zhang Hao's argument is quite similar to that of Carl Becker's, although he did not cite Becker. Interestingly, Peter Gay also argues that Enlightenment thought was itself contaminated by the very religiosity it hoped to circumscribe. (Gay, *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1 [New York: Vintage Books, 1966], p. 24). For Zhang's thinking, see his "Chong-fang Wu-si – lun 'Wu-si' si-xiang de liang-qi xing", in Xu Ji-lin, *Er-shi shi-ji Zhong-guo si-xiang shi-lun* (Shanghai: Dong-fang, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 3-30. This anthology edited by Xu will be used heavily in the following.

<sup>20</sup> And perhaps also Peter Gay's thesis equating the Enlightenment values to those of modern world.

<sup>21</sup> Li Ze-hou, in Xu Ji-lin, *Zhong-guo si-xiang shi-lun*, vol. 1, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> A collection of essays commemorating the 70th anniversary of the May-fourth, edited by Tang Yi-jie is entitled *Lun chuan-tong yu fan chuan-tong*, that is "on tradition and anti-tradition" (Taipei: Lian-jing, 1989).

discourse would collapse from within, simply because it was not able to handle the tradition properly.<sup>23</sup>

Some American educated scholars were aware of the post-modernist critique of the Enlightenment master narrative, and saw this as providing ammunition to their critique of the May Fourth enlightenment program. However, they now pointed to the Chinese tradition as a trap that the May-fourth thinkers had not properly handled. The great Chinese “pristine” tradition was now shown to be a great “other”, one that was inherently significant and intellectually resourceful. The “progressive”, modernist May-fourth master narrative had failed to appreciate it.

As I pointed out above, most interpreters of the May Fourth Movement did not really know what post-modernism was, and they seldom used post-modernist vocabulary.<sup>24</sup> However, critique on the Enlightenment was used to justify their appeal to the tradition, considering it an inevitable existence that could not simply be put aside or jettisoned.<sup>25</sup> Although all of them accept that Chinese Confucian tradition has to be “transformed” or, better, “reformed”, the fact is that its advocates are convinced of its fundamental relevance and legitimacy. This is an inviolable historical fact that has universal appeal and justification. Even the liberal-minded Yü Ying-shi, a widely respected Princeton professor, would invoke such thinkers as Edward Shils and Allan Bloom to justify the need to “speak, [but] employing the same perspective of the past thinkers and writers”.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Wang Hui, in Xu Ji-lin, *Zhong-guo si-xiang shi-lun*, vol. 1, pp. 63-7. Ironically, he thinks that Western Enlightenment trapped itself with ideas and contradictions that only Marxism could solve, as the Chinese experiences show.

<sup>24</sup> The comprehensive anthology, entitled *Main Trends of Thought in China in the 1980's (Ba-shi nian-dai Zhong-guo si-chao)*, published in 1992 (edited by Cao Wei-jing and Wei Cheng-si and published by Shanghai: Xue-lin) does not mention post-modernism. F. Jameson's famous lecture tour in China occurred in 1985, and the lectures were then compiled and translated by Tang Xiao-bing and published in Taiwan in 1989). Tang is now teaching in University of California, Irvine.

<sup>25</sup> American scholarship of the sixties and seventies that has been critical of German romanticist philosophy, such as those works by George Mosse, Leonard Krieger, and Hanna Arendt have not been systematically introduced, even if works by Iggers and Arendt have been frequently mentioned in Taiwan. The introduction of Iggers and Arendt has been strictly within their academic context. Chinese readers do not usually relate them to any prevalent *Weltanschauung* or trends of thought in the US.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 439. To be fair, Yü is not espousing wholesale “conservatism” (though certainly Burkian), much less “nationalism” or “traditionalism”, over “radicalism” (He does not use

The irony of post-modernist critique of the “Enlightenment” provides a justification for the more tradition-minded Chinese students to rail against the enlightenment agenda of the modernist May Fourth discourse. In an ironic twist, Chinese interpreters became able to defend the Chinese tradition with a weapon hitherto unused. The idea of “enlightenment” as a philosophy or mind-set (one interpreter characterizes it as “Zeitgeist”) is now for them “radical” and is harmful to the understanding of the Chinese world view and cultural premises. In a word, the Chinese nation has returned to be an absolute value as such. They believe that the recent Western reinterpretation of the European “Enlightenment” has amply demonstrated this point.

The persistent popularity of Heidegger in Taiwan also fuels the popularity of criticizing the modernity project. This is yet another twist of an intellectual exercise. For lack of space, I will not dwell on this issue, but simply point out that the romanticist thinking and German idealist philosophy have mesmerized Chinese thinkers for most of the twentieth century, and it is no wonder that “tradition” has remained such an important preoccupation, and as a result why the post-modernist critique of the Enlightenment could have such an appeal.

## The Asian Value

Critique of the modernist project and the rationalist Enlightenment discourse finds an especially powerful ally in the advocates of the so-called “Asian values”. It is indeed a coincidence that critique of the Enlightenment and the Edward Saidian criticism of “Orientalism” should come at a time when the so-called “Asian Four Dragons” were making quantum jump in industrialization and economic prosperity. This was in the late seventies. By the early 80’s, the

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words like progressivism, let alone liberalism or modernism). He goes to a great length to explain that all he was doing was to emphasize the need to know the “intellectual context” of historical events, and, specifically, the May-fourth Movement. In other words, he is proposing a preliminary “historicist” position (see above). Unfortunately the people he cites to support his argument render ammunition to those who criticize him as a cultural conservative. This article aside, other writings of Yü should show that he should more properly be considered as a concerned liberal and a critical-minded patriot.

In this connection, it is important to point out that for Xu Ji-lin, whose anthology I relay for writing this section, the “conservatives” are such as Gu Hong-ming, Yang Du, Liang Jü-chuan, etc. Most of us would consider these as “reactionaries.” See his *Zhong-guo si-xiang shi-lun*, vol. II, pp. 191-365.

rapid growth and prosperity in these countries began to command the thinking persons' attention and interpretation. Names like Peter Berger may not be familiar to Chinese authors, but Du Wei-ming (Tu Wei-ming), a professor from Harvard, quickly makes his name by combining the idealist critique of modern civilization, social scientists' critique (*a propos* Max Weber) of scientific rationalism or rationality, and post-modernist and post-colonialist critique of the Enlightenment into a general theory of "multiple modernizations" to argue that some kind of "Confucian modernization" was being realized in the four little dragons.<sup>27</sup> For some time, Tu's argument has enormously influenced students of East Asian modernization from the US to Singapore. The most popularized slogan for them is "modernization is not Westernization".

The notion that modernization should not be construed as Westernization seems to especially attract Chinese thinkers. The rise of this notion goes back to the May Fourth period, when some "radical" thinkers proposed that China should "Westernize" wholesale (*quan-pan xi-hua*). This of course is a simplistic and actually absurd proposal. However, it was taken quite seriously and even literally by a number of otherwise very intelligent writers. From the discussion above, it is easy to see why "Westernization" should become such a preoccupation for many latter-day Chinese thinkers: some seek to re-spatialize the Chinese tradition to accommodate the new values, while others consider it a monstrous idea threatening the very justification of the Chinese world view and ways of life. It would seem that there was no possibility whatsoever that the two notions could exist side by side.

One of the sources for such an anxiety over how modernizing China could be done without becoming Westernized, as I see it, is the Chinese permanent fixation with unity, especially that of ideology, which is its most conspicuous manifestation. This is not a place to discuss this intellectual trait. Instead, I should use actual writings in recent years to illustrate it. Wang Hui's discussion on the "failure" of the May Fourth comes immediately to my mind. According to him, the May Fourth thinking contains within itself the "trap" that would bring

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<sup>27</sup> This is a very simplified presentation of Tu's positions which have evolved over a 20 year period. His "multiple modernizations" theory only appeared recently. Overall, however, I think this is a fair assessment of his position(s). See his "Multiple Modernities: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Implications of East Asian Modernity", in Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, ed., *Culture Matters, How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 256-67.

its own downfall. I referred to the notion of “trap” already. In Wang’s analysis, the May Fourth Movement was not much more than an assemblage of multiple “attitudes” hiding behind a superficial consistency or unity. The internal division or fragmentation is its true nature. For him, the Movement lacked a coherent program that had been carefully thought through. Wanting such a coherent program of action, it naturally failed.<sup>28</sup>

Wang’s analysis is interesting. It is typical of history imagined through the historian’s spectacles. Obviously, the May Fourth thinking represented an amalgam of a multitude of trends of ideas and opinions (he calls them “attitudes”). The Movement was an instantaneous event, lasting not more than a few years, even if with ripples that lasted considerably much longer. Overall, it was very “attitudinal”, meaning that there were a variety of views expressed simultaneously in a critical moment in earnest anticipation of a dignified, wealthy, powerful, and, well, harmonious, “new” China.<sup>29</sup> For Wang Hui, this was its fatal weakness, because the ideas and opinions were not “unified”. They remained only an amalgam of incoherent “attitudes”.

Wang Hui’s diagnosis of the May Fourth discourse faithfully reflected the Chinese approach to “programs of action” or “project”. Diversified and internally contrasting opinions by definition or by nature could not constitute a force that could act, much less act correctly or forcefully. There could be a great multitude of diversified ideas, but they should not remain incoherent or disparate. They must fall into place, so that they could be made sense of, and be understood so as to provide basis for action. Further, the hierarchy of importance or sequence of priority should always be established. They can then be used effectively to direct social and political actions.

If my analysis is correct with regard to the Chinese consciousness about the necessity of a coherent world view or a structured world order, then it is not difficult to see why wholesale “Westernization” could not have a place in Chinese thinking, because it had not been a vintage “Chinese” idea. At least, it has not been integrated into the Chinese mental universe. It could not remain just one of the many ideas without being properly assessed of its role and its assigned space. Before that, “Western or Westernized values” would be an intellectually dishon-

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<sup>28</sup> Xu Ji-lin, *Zhong-guo si-xiang shi-lun*, vol. 1, pp. 32-45.

<sup>29</sup> I put “new” in parenthesis, to mean that it is used literally as a temporal stage. Many traditionalist thinkers perhaps wanted to return to ancient China or antiquity.

est idea; after that, they no longer are “Western”, and the expression, “Western” in the integrated Chinese universe of values would be an oxymoron. After that, they no longer are “Western”. All in all, “Western” or “Westernization” has to be marginalized, or even purged.

This being the case, many thinkers continue to preoccupy themselves with a theoretical space that would at the same time preserve the legitimacy and integrity for the tradition, while seeking to fill in the space with ideas that would not cause tension or conflict. The reason that they have not been able to find a proper “space” for “Westernization” (not to say “wholesale Westernization”) is precisely because other than being “other”, it has no legitimacy and does not fit into the landscape. There is always a fear of “others”, often called “xenophobia”, throughout Chinese history. This is its fine moment.<sup>30</sup>

To return to the notion of Asian value, then it is clear that it is a mockery of the broadly-defined post-modernist position. This is indeed unexpected, because the notion of “multiple modernizations” should imply that all “others” would be treated at least equally, or equitably, and we should not insist that they be brought under a coherent, unified and hierarchically defined order.

To be fair to the thinkers opposing or critical of “Westernization”, one must admit that the belief is, on the surface, a post-modernist one, or is influenced by it. They are against the Enlightenment discourse, comprising the ideas of democracy, liberty, capitalist economy and, especially, scientific rationality.<sup>31</sup> The opposition as such sounds quite persuasive in the emerging post-modernist intellectual atmosphere of the 1980’s and 1990’s. In the writings of many Chinese thinkers at the time, modernization becomes a project that only the Chinese peo-

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<sup>30</sup> And of course, their search for a “theory”, or a panacea, eventually resulted in the rise of Communism.

<sup>31</sup> In the eighties, it was for a while fashionable to argue for “enlightened” authoritarianism, because all four little dragons (except for Hong Kong, which was hardly a democracy, either) had authoritarian governments. Liberty and freedom, as is well know, are both translated into Chinese as “zi-you”. It has always been easy to confuse the two. While Isaiah Berlin’s famous essay on two kinds of “liberty” or “freedom,” has been introduced into Chinese (Taiwanese) academic world since the 1980’s, it has never prevailed over Heidegger’s or the pre-War German works championing the German notion of “freedom” (*a propos* Leonard Krieger). Capitalism until today of course is still a taboo as an economic idea in China; neither is it a much celebrated intellectual notion in Taiwan. Globalization, which strictly speaking is not related to the Enlightenment discourse, and with which F. Jameson has been ambivalent, is very much a cursed conception. Scientific rationality is considered as non-Chinese, and “limited” in its usefulness.

ple could undertake; it is their own destiny, and they alone could give shape, content and meaning to it. In an eerie way, this goes back to the earlier contention, by such as Spence, that the Chinese will have “their own expertise”.<sup>32</sup>

The notion that “modernization is not Westernization” is, however, clearly informed by “award[ing] the ‘other’ priority than the need for ‘diversity’,” mentioned above. The cultural-nationalistic overtone is all but clear. I wish to say that the notion has a meaning not so much as opposing the “modernization” project of material progress, but a reflection of the need for dignity of the Chinese people, whose entire education had been to uphold a great civilization that should continue to have a real and respected role to play in the modern world. The Chinese in the 19th and 20th centuries sought “wealth and power”, and therefore to pretend that the Chinese “other” was one that did not have any use for “progress” belies the real motivation behind the notion of “Asian value”. Rather, the argument runs like this: it is the post-modernist failure to even try to define “other” in an imagined ordered and integrated arena of civilizations that has forced scholars like Tu to demand a closer examination of the Chinese or Asian values.<sup>33</sup> For them, the “Asian value” notion conflicts with the basic tenets of the post-modern discourse, because it demands an ordered, hierarchically constructed, and integrated and spiritually equitable world order. I do not think that it was among the post-modern agendas that there could or should be this kind of unity or coherence.

To conclude this discussion on “Asian value”, let me raise the issue of “unity amid diversity”, a notion that has fascinated many a modern Chinese Confucian thinker, as this notion was championed by none other than Zhu Xi (1130-1200), perhaps the most sophisticated thinker in China since Confucius. Simply put, Zhu Xi believed that there is a universal principle, and that it manifests itself in the multitude of things and ideas. The diversity, however, does not eliminate the possibility of the existence of the ultimate truth, the principle. The consummate truth for Zhu Xi thus is the intrinsic coherence of all things and

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<sup>32</sup> In an interview on Christianity in China, Spence points out that the Chinese themselves will develop their own kind of Christianity, presumably qualitatively (not only theologically, but also in terms of “meaning” and liturgy) different from that of the West. See Donald Yerxa and Karl Giberson, “The Picasso of Chinese Studies, A Conversation with Jonathan Spence”, in *Books and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1999), pp. 20-4.

<sup>33</sup> The role of Mohammed Mahatir, Malaysia’s Prime Minister is really an afterthought, and only added fuel to the notion of “Confucian values”, making it now “Asian values”.

ideas. The importance of this realization is probably more than the delineation of the principle itself. Although the notion of “time” is not involved here, it does make sense if one argues that the coherence or integrity will ultimately be realized at the end of time. However, this is beside the point. The important thing is to hold on to this belief that behind “diversity” there is “unity”. The popularity of this “unity amid diversity” notion has informed generations of Chinese thinkers, historical thinkers among them. It, as pointed out above, is exactly the cause for the incongruity between the need for proposing “Asian value”, jettisoning the Enlightenment discourse, and the need to juxtapose it with the post-modern theory, itself also opposing the master narrative of the Enlightenment. The core of the tension is the difficulty for the Chinese to graft Western values into the Chinese tradition, which has always been considered as “unified”. The Chinese modernization program thus becomes a program against “Westernization”. The Modernization advocates are thus “conservatives”.<sup>34</sup>

### **All Nationalisms are not Bad**

I have examined here some of the more influential ideas that have dominated China’s recent historical writings. My concern is to show that post-modernist theories have unwittingly lent strength to a more or less conservative, traditionalist and clearly nationalist position that Chinese historians and thinkers have willingly or subconsciously taken. Post-colonialist theories are constructed along the line of elevating the “other”, to promote culture war, and to prioritize the “colonized”. It therefore seemingly serves the nationalist purpose well. However, post-modernist theories emerged first really as an agenda for combating the materialist, or Marxist excessiveness in its negotiations with the use of planetary resources. Other early post-modernists believe that all “governing ideologies”, Marxism among them, contain inherent oppositions. In other words, these early thinkers who defined the contour of post-modern thinking were critically minded. However, none of them were concerned with nationalist, or racial, issues. It is therefore strange that I should argue that post-modernist thinking contains the potentials for a kind of conservative nationalism to rise. An examination of the discussions above, one will find that the rising nationalist sentiment among Chinese writers coincided in time with the rising

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<sup>34</sup> As so are the classical liberals, who are now often looked upon as “conservatives”.

post-modernist and post-colonialist discourses. The relationship between the two was thus primarily a historical coincidence, much more than a logical necessity.

The coincidence is nowhere more evident than in the early 1980's, when Chinese thinkers began to re-embrace Confucianism and debated what should be the ideological foundation for the nation, now that the Cultural Revolution had proven Marxism a failure. A number of Chinese authors proposed that nationalism or patriotism should serve as the state ideology. For nationalism, they were talking about the Chinese tradition, which almost literally means Confucianism. For me, there is no greater irony than for the bankrupt Marxists to embrace Confucianism, especially since they were neither upholding any post-modernist view nor systematically criticizing the excessiveness of Marxism. Rather, they were burdened by a xenophobic sentiment, seeking to use "nationalism" to justify the restoration of a value system that they could be comfortable with. Nationalist sentiment has always been a dominating theme in modern Chinese intellectual representation or self-reflection since before the May Fourth. It finds a strange echo sixty years later among the disillusioned Marxists/Communists.

However, nationalist feeling in the late 19th and early 20th century was also a part of the Modernization project. Sun Yat-sen's thought which had informed modern Chinese discourse of the nation's destiny favored "nationalism". However, it has been clear to many interpreters that Sun's nationalism was actually being developed along the line of criticizing Chinese culture. For Sun and his contemporaries, nationalism represented a "progressive" thinking. It is an irony that by the 1980's, nationalism should become a cultural traditionalist search for an effective cure to rescue the Chinese nation[-state].

It does not matter which version of nationalism modern Chinese thinkers embraced, all of them were constructed along the line of redefining the Chinese culture. "Culture", which Peter Bol has used to translate Chinese *wen*, is usually translated into Chinese as "wen-hua", suggesting transvaluation and enlightenment.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese idea of "culture" indeed carries the meaning of "transform" or "reform", or more precisely, the ideal of "changing for the better", especially in moral terms. Nationalism, when used in the context of searching for a cultural redefinition of the *raison d'être* of a nation, is fundamentally a representation of

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Bol's translation is a good one for "wen", which, when used in temporal context, suggests a process of "culturalization", and even transvaluation. Culture is also often translated into *wen-ming*. *Ming* has no other translation than enlightenment or brightness.

a nation's changing cultural identity. The groping for a nation's new narrative is a kind of nationalist endeavor, and actually a dominant one. The return to Confucianism can therefore be understood as a kind of nationalism. One has to look at it as a cultural phenomenon, a reconstruction of a cultural narrative, seeking to return Confucianism from its marginalized position to the center.

Couched in this way, one could say that practically all modern Chinese historians have seized on the powerful notion of the 19th century nationalism as an ideal. They believed that balm could help the Chinese people in their search for cultural regeneration, modernization and even Chinese hegemony in the world arena of military struggle. The parameter of the concept of "nationalism", however, has been expanded too broad. It now became itself a site of competing claims for dominance. In this site, priority is the norm. However, it is not too far from the truth to say that within the site, there was no equitable or equal co-existence among the competing narratives.<sup>36</sup>

If post-modern theories are useful in helping the Chinese people look at their own history without becoming victimized by History, to enlighten themselves without becoming overpowered by the Enlightenment, and to become modernized without Modernization, then it is important that enlightened modernization is not "prioritized" as a hegemony. The "other" should be given an equitable space for participating in the intellectual world of representations. In other words, "nationalism" should remain one of many "nationalisms", so that not one narrative could become the master narrative of modern China: the self-reflecting or self-imagining of China as a mere "nation", Chinese history as only little-case history, and the Chinese modernization narratives remaining pluralistic and even disparately diversified.

I have pointed out above that the use of post-modernist or post-colonialist ideas can be a double-edged sword. From the discussion above, it is indeed true that many people could use them to justify awarding the "other" a hegemonic position. Modern Chinese nationalism has constantly sought to situate itself in the hegemonic position so as to provide a foundation for Modernization. It does not then surprise many readers that all of the attempts, in the name of coherence and unity, abuse the beauty of multiple narratives.

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<sup>36</sup> The argument here is somewhat difficult and perhaps even confusing. What I am trying to say is that within the arena, different interpretations or understandings of the notion "nationalism" could not co-exist side by side. The Chinese thinkers just have to construct an order or hierarchy of differentiated importance, and assign or apportion them in their respective spaces.

My advice is to accept the post-modernist concession that not all “nationalisms” are bad, indeed, all nationalisms are not bad.

### **Conclusion: the Happy/Unhappy Minnow**

Let me return to the positions proposed by Isaiah Berlin and Stephen Toumlin: decency and reason. Since Nietzsche and 19th century historicists bankrupt the complacent natural law tradition, the world has lost its innocence. Berlin and Toumlin provide some later-day solace, helping us in our facing the brave new world. However, from their writings, one senses that the most serious danger in post-modern thinking is that it implies absolute relativism.

Toumlin represents an epistemological concern. Admitting that modern scientific rationalism cannot provide us with ultimate answers to everything, we nonetheless should allow rational spirit be at least used as a platform for approximating the truth, and accept that reasonableness should be the position for managing competing values. Berlin approached value relativity with a moral self-reflection and counseled decency as a principle for continual dialogue.

The epistemological position is exactly what Zhuang-zi and Hui Shi were concerned with. Obviously, Zhuang-zi was ridiculing Hui Shi's confidence about logicity. But what exactly was Zhuang-zi's position? Zhuang-zi is best described as a skepticist, and his kind of skepticism has informed the Chinese people for more than two thousand years. The Confucians condoned and even accepted him, mainly for his harmless, sometimes playful, but always exciting sparks of brilliance. Zhuang-zi's critique of Confucius was actually often accepted by Confucians when they were in doubt of the feasibility of a perfect and unified world. But clearly Zhuang-zi had some use of Confucian world view, to which he could always retreat from absurdist nihilism that his position could entail. In other words, Zhuang-zi may be deriding Hui Shi's rationality, but he also has his own belief, and he is not afraid of explaining it. Hui Shi is characterized as a champion of rationality or at least a logician, and his position is of course unmistakable and well defined. Only the minnows escape being “comprehended” by the humans. Of course, we still do not know whether the minnows in the River Hao or anywhere are happy. Perhaps they are unhappy because of our attention. Epistemologically, we will never know the answer, unless perhaps one day when we could become minnows ourselves.

The morale of the parable of the River of Hao, as I see it, is this: the minnows were perhaps happy because the ultimate answer lies not in the human thinking or wisdom. The minnows alone have the answers. But what then should the humans do? I think the answer lies in the construction of a game plan for equal or equitable engagement or dialogue amid the diversity of different positions. There is and perhaps will never have an answer, and therefore the attempts to prioritize any position will only cause further tension or confusion. I do not think that the following position is tenable, that there would be an ultimate truth, a moment of absolute clarity or tranquility, when everything is appropriated of its correct place and is integrated and even unified. Instead, diversity and even endless tension could only be resolved by the democratic principle of ceaseless negotiations amid endless emergent or re-emergent narratives. Truth eludes, but humans need to live. They have to learn to live in confusion. The “procedural justice” will be the only way to uphold, in the ocean of chaos, a peaceable life. There is no substantial justice.

Morally, and on the individual level, I think Berlin’s idea of “decency” is a useful one, even though from a post-modernist position, perhaps sublimation may serve even as a better antidote to the consternation that individual thinking person will perennially find in their ceaseless confrontation with the grotesque. In other words, a mental preparedness should be based not on an epistemological tranquility (except at the end of time), but rather on a moral awareness of the need of participating in the permanent game of negotiations. It is in such awareness that the humans will find the notion of decency imperative and meaningful. Decency is a position, an attitude and even a commonly accepted principle of engagement. It is itself not a truth, but is only a way of truth-finding. To find out whether the minnows were happy, the only possible way is to refrain from hegemonizing one’s own position, and not to allow the use of power to determine the answer.

In conclusion, the paradox of the minnows is that despite human ignorance, the humans will endlessly seek to prioritize particular narratives, be they the master narrative, meta-narrative, or the “other”. The Post-modernist critique of the Enlightenment has led to many a Chinese historian to consider that Modernization and enlightenment projects are all questionable, and that the Chinese or Asian people are justifiable to engage in “cultural war” and prioritize their own values. The train of history has thus been derailed to allow nationalist or essentialist-culturalist narratives to dominate recent Chinese historical thinking.

Such a development perhaps was beyond the wildest dream or imagination of the post-modernists.

The minnows were saying: “this is because the post-modernists think they know better.”