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## TIMESPACE, SOCIAL SPACE, AND THE QUESTION OF CHINESE CULTURE

ARIF DIRLIK

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When I was honored with an invitation to speak at this conference,<sup>1</sup> the general theme suggested for my presentation was “Dimensions of Chinese Diversity.” For reasons that I hope will become clear below, I have placed a more activist reading on that theme for my presentation today: how to analyze difference in that society located in the Southeastern corner of the Eurasian continent, which long has spilled over the boundaries suggested by that location? I find it difficult to think of the “dimensions of Chinese diversity” before I can settle in my mind questions pertaining to diversity, culture, and, above all, China. What I undertake below is a reflection on the relationship between these terms.

The difference that is the most relevant here is cultural difference. Over the last two decades, global transformations have set in motion both cultures, and how we conceive them. They have given rise to novel cultural configurations, endowed with new meanings long-standing cultural formations, and forced upon our consciousness recognition of previously ignored or marginalized dimensions of cultural difference; to the point where the more culture impinges upon our consciousness as a constituent of economic, social and political identity and behavior – the so-called “cultural turn” – the less certain we seem to be of what we mean when we refer to culture as an identifying mark of societies.

So-called Chinese culture is no exception. At one level, there has been little change from the past. To say that what we call Chinese culture is complicated, that it is subject to immense variation over time and space, and that it is inflected differently depending on social location is to state the obvious. And yet that has not, and does not, seem to deter anyone in China or abroad from speaking as if there were only one Chinese culture. Chinese and non-Chinese alike continue to speak about a Chinese culture of long duration which marks all the people we describe as Chinese who in turn participate in the propagation of that culture. Contemporary scholarship in China and abroad has revealed much that we did not know before, of course, but the difference between the present and the past may lie not so much in the level of knowledge

<sup>1</sup> I.e., The Fifth European Ecumenical China Conference, Rome, 16–20 September 2005.

but rather in a willingness to recognize what we have known all along. A sharpening awareness not only of temporal and spatial but also of social difference, combined with suspicion of claims to cultural essentialism and uniformity, have provoked calls in recent years for the deconstruction of Chinese culture, which at its logical extreme leaves us with nothing but a conglomeration of individuals who are difficult to name because we do not know quite what to call the collectivity that once was identifiable by a common culture. The dilemma presents us with a challenge to reconcile the deconstruction of Chinese culture with continued claims to or attributions of collective cultural identity that refuse to go away for all the evidence to the contrary in theory, or in the practice of everyday life. The analysis of difference, I suggest below, needs also to account for commonality, without which difference itself is meaningless. I will address this issue by way of conclusion.

From a contemporary vantage point, any discussion of culture needs to begin with questioning modernity's ways of mapping human societies in terms of civilizations, nations, or, simply, cultures, which appear in history and historical geography in their location in or relationship to some physical entity, ranging from trans- to sub-continental regions to national and sub-national territories. The nation, or the nation-state, has been the privileged unit of modernity, but has never ruled out entirely other units of mapping cultures – from the “tribal” units of anthropology to the civilizational units of high cultures. These mappings establish boundaries that are thought to express something about what they contain – more often than not a political unit that derives its identity from particular social and cultural practices, the one not clearly distinguished from the other. These practices are usually taken to radiate from a center somewhere within the boundaries, fading to near invisibility by the time they have reached the boundaries, or are checked in their progress either by the obstacles of physical geography, or encounter with another unit in search of *its* limits.

The encounter produces a boundary, but also a “contact zone,” which Mary Louise Pratt has used to conceptualize “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”<sup>2</sup> We might add that the “colonial encounter” is only one among a multiplicity of possible encounters that shape the contact zone. In contemporary postcolonial criticism, which has stressed the interaction rather than the hierarchy aspects of the encounter, the interactions in the contact zones have been credited with the production of hybridities that point to the possibility of new social and cultural departures and formations.

Modernity's ways of mapping the world in terms of nations, cultures and civilizations have served to provide with a historical geography forms of power created by modernity, but in the process have erased alternative ways of conceiving space, as well as complexities in the dynamics of “the production of space,” as Henri Lefevbre

<sup>2</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London 1992), p. 6. Pratt in term borrows the term from its use in linguistics, with reference to “contact languages.” She notes also that a similar conceptualization has been deployed in literature, in the reference to “contact literatures.”

put it, that might point to alternative ways of organizing society and culture.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, it is arguable that modernity's ways of conceiving historical spaces put the cart before the horse in establishing that it was the whole that was the point of departure in reading the parts rather than the other way around: that it was a historical process of countless encounters between different spaces out of which wholes have been constituted; that the constitution has not been a diffusion of social and cultural practices from some center but the product of the dialectical encounters in many contact zones, and that a whole thus conceived represents as much a "strategy of containment," as Fredric Jameson has termed it,<sup>4</sup> as it does some unit of coherence (not to be confused with homogeneity or some identifiable essence), and is subject for the same reason to forces of destabilization produced by the very same encounters as they assume new historical guises. There is little reason, in rethinking global formations, why our notions of space should be limited by nations and civilizations, which then also shape the ways in which we conceive of cultural spaces.

Contact zones historically precede national and civilizational formations, or the formations of political economy, in the many and multi-faceted encounters among humans that were crucial in generating new social and cultural practices; including, ultimately, nations and civilization. These encounters are not just between politically identifiable units, but involve the encounters of many social and cultural spaces. They are, therefore, overdetermined, and subject to the dialectics of the parts of which they are constituted. They need not be atomized to the level of the individual, because individual encounters take place within contexts that seek to reproduce themselves, creating the possibility of continuity, but also of disruption, depending on circumstances. It is not simply nations, civilizations and other social/political units identifiable as groups (including places) that have cultures. Social spaces represented by concepts with which we think the world – from ethnicity to gender to class to institutions of various kinds and scope, to name a few prominent ones – also compel us to think of cultural coherence as a crucial aspect in the constitution of social groups encompassed by the concept, from which the concept derives its plausibility. Culture needs to be conceived, in other words, not just in terms of physical, political and economic spaces, but also through the many encounters between social spaces. Such a complicated notion of contact zones would suggest also that localized encounters take historical if not logical priority in the formation of larger political and cultural units, and it is "hybridity" that generates notions of civilizational or national conceptions of cultural purity, rather than the other way around, as is often assumed even in postcolonial critiques of essentialism.

The localization of processes of cultural formations derives further justification from materially-grounded conceptions of culture articulated most forcefully in the post-Stalinist Marxisms of Antonio Gramsci, Henri Lefebvre, and the British new left, from Raymond Williams to Eric Hobsbawm to E.P. Thompson. Against textual notions of culture, which equate cultures with civilizations, or the abstraction of es-

<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Trans. from the French by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Frededric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY 1981).

sences from folklore or everyday practices in order to invent national cultures, a materially grounded notion of culture leads inevitably to “places,” and the practices of everyday life, with a consequent proliferation of the spaces of culture.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, efforts to realize the promise of civilization or nation appear also as colonizing activities seeking to erase or replace the many cultures of everyday life with abstractly conceived cultural uniformities, and difference with homogeneity. And as it is with physical spaces, so it is with social spaces. The social spaces indicated by categories of class, gender or ethnicity refer also to the cultural differences that mark the relationships between social groups, that are also the objects of the homogenizing urges of modernization.

Colonial modernity finds its ultimate expression in globalization. Ironically, the reassertion of local difference against forces of global cultural homogenization also indicates that the colonialism of capital, the nation-state or civilization was never complete. The dispersal of culture into many localized encounters renders it elusive both as phenomenon and as a principle of mapping and historical explanation. Rendered into a weapon of struggles over identity and difference, culture becomes more questionable than ever as a principle of social and historical explanation. This perspective underlines the constructedness of culture, and draws attention to agency from lasting structural significance – even if the structure is conceived as ongoing reproduction. It is the perspective of what I have described elsewhere as Global Modernity, which is conceived at once as a negation and fulfillment of a colonial modernity, in which cultural identity is inextricably entangled in the political economy of a globalizing capitalism, and the world is divided, so to speak, by a commonality of interests. As an anthropologist of media writes,

... difference can no longer be understood as a function of culture. Difference is no longer so much a measure of the distance between two or more bounded cultural worlds; rather, we may now understand it as a potentiality, a space of indeterminacy inherent to all processes of mediation, and therefore inherent to the social process per se.<sup>6</sup>

This, too, calls for new ways of conceiving space, especially social and cultural space.

### Cultural Formations in China: The Present and Its Past

The “traditional” account of the formation of Chinese civilization provides a textbook case of civilization radiating from a center toward peripheries where barbarism gradually takes over, defining the limits of the world worth knowing. The “Tribute of Yu” (*Yugong* 禹貢) section of the *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of History) describes a society with the monarch at its center, where the distance from the monarch indicates both social status and level of civilization, disappearing at its margins into a shadowy realm in which there is no clear cut distinction between criminal and barbarian and,

<sup>5</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20 (2001), pp. 139-174. See, also, the essays in Roxann Prazniak and Arif Dirlik (eds.), *Places and Politics in an Age of Globalization* (Boulder, CO 2001).

<sup>6</sup> William Mazzarella, “Culture, Globalization, Mediation,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), p. 360.

by implication, Han and others. In the political realities of the late Zhou of which this idealized version of civilization is a product, the Central Kingdoms (*Zhongguo* 中國) of the Yellow River plain were already giving way to a Central Kingdom (also *Zhongguo* 中國), giving rise to more sharply demarcated ideological boundaries between the inside and the outside. It then becomes “the civilizing mission” of the center to fill out the area that is to become China which, we may note, is to take a good part of what we habitually describe as imperial Chinese history. One recent work points to the Yuan Dynasty (1275–1368) as the period when China took its modern form.<sup>7</sup> It is not until the Ming Dynasty that the Great Wall defines the contours of “China,” and it is not until the Qing, with its own expansionism to the West and the Southwest, that China comes to occupy the area that it does today.<sup>8</sup> Throughout, the inside and the outside interact in producing the cultural formations that then come to demarcate the inside and the outside. These complexities disappear in nationalist historiography, which puts its own spin on imperial mythology. It is no longer the monarch that is at the center of civilization but the nation of China. And Chinese civilization now appears as a radiation in time and space from a Yellow River core, fulfilling its destiny in the occupation and transformation of the area that the nation claims as its own. This civilization is not so much a product of history as it is an articulation in space and time of a civilization fully formed in its “essence” by the late Zhou, or even earlier as in the popular cliché of 5000 years of Chinese civilization.

This account of a China that is culturally changing and yet timeless is noteworthy not only for what it says but also for what it silences. The differences it recognizes pertain mostly to differences between the Han and other nationalities, an ethnic diversity in which the Han constitute the culturally dominant (and superior) position in the formation of China; it is the Han civilizing mission that ultimately unifies China culturally and endows it with its fundamental characteristics. Regional differences are recognized, but without a clear accounting for what brought them about, except as local adjustments of a Han culture spreading out of the Yellow River plains. Likewise, with the waning of Marxist influence in the historiography of China, issues in the social production of cultural difference – from urban-rural differences to differences produced by class and gender – have receded from the forefront of the account, and no longer serve to call into question its assumptions about cultural homogeneity socially and spatially.

The “idea” of China has acquired considerable complexity in recent years, presenting unprecedented challenges in the writing and teaching of Chinese history. The complexity itself is not novel; I derive the term, “idea of China,” from the title of a

<sup>7</sup> Cai Fenglin 蔡風林, *Zhongguo nongmu wenhua jiehe yu Zhonghua minzude xingcheng* 中國農牧文化結合與中華民族的形成 (The synthesis of agriculture and nomadism in the formation of the Chinese nation) (Beijing 2000). See, especially, chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> See recent studies of Qing imperialism in the Southwest and the Northwest, by Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago 2001); James A. Millward, *Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford, CA 1998); and, most recently, Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA 2005).

book by Andrew March, published three decades ago.<sup>9</sup> China as an imagined entity that has assumed different characteristics over time has been the subject of many a splendid study, from Raymond Dawson's *The Chinese Chameleon* to Harold Isaacs' *Scratches on Our Minds*.<sup>10</sup> The fact that such studies are still called for, and produced, may also alert us to continued resistance among the general public (here, or in China), as well as in scholarship, to viewing China historically.

The present presents its own challenges. The knowledge of changing images of China was not accompanied in the past by any radical questioning of the realities of China, or of being Chinese. Until only a generation ago, the dominant historical paradigm identified China with the boundaries of the so-called "Mainland China," saw in the unfolding of the past the formation – in more culturalist guises, articulation – of an identifiable "Chineseness," and viewed regions and regionalism as legacies to be overcome in the process of nation-building.<sup>11</sup> China in this paradigm was not just a nation, it was a civilization, with a "great tradition" continuous from the earliest times to the present, possibly matched only by India – "five-thousand years of civilization," as the common cliché would have it. It is fair to say that for all their differences otherwise, Chinese and non-Chinese historians shared in this common paradigm.

The culturalism – and the clichés – persist, but they face new challenges, not by phenomena that are necessarily novel in themselves, but by older phenomena that have been given a new kind of recognition. Most important in this regard is the reopening of China from the 1980s, which has led not only to a valorization of contacts with the outside in the formation of a Chinese culture, but also a greater willingness to recognize difference internally.<sup>12</sup> This by no means signals the end of Han cultural colonialism – as is evident most readily in the strenuous efforts to assimilate Tibet. But it has led to greater willingness among Chinese scholars to confront issues of cultural complexity. One recent study of "traditional Chinese culture," available for use as school textbook, observes that "the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture become visible only in comparison with other cultures; without such comparison, there is no way to determine those characteristics. Most modern Chinese scholars who have discussed the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture have done so in

<sup>8</sup> Andrew L. March, *The Idea of China: Myth and Theory in Geographic Thought* (New York 1974).

<sup>9</sup> Raymond S. Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London 1967), and, Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (White Plains, NY 1980).

<sup>11</sup> I use "mainland China" here in a historical sense. For the last fifty years, "Mainland China" represented for many Communist deviation from true Chinese culture which was supposedly preserved in Taiwan and, to a much smaller extent, in isolated pockets in Hong Kong such as the Chinese University of Hong Kong, home to the "New Confucians."

<sup>12</sup> The celebrations of the 600th anniversary of the Zheng He 鄭和 voyages to the West not only underline Chinese contributions to the peaceful growth of global trade, but also acknowledge the cultural transformations of coastal China, namely Fujian and Guangdong, by cultural flows from the outside.

comparison with Western culture.”<sup>13</sup> The acknowledgment of the inventedness of tradition in the confrontation with “the West” (itself important as a limitation on comparison) does not stop the authors from reaffirming characteristics of Chinese culture, but it does make for a more complicated account of the culture in their recognition that most of what is taken to be tradition is in fact the tradition of the elite.<sup>14</sup> It is revealing, nevertheless, that of the 400 pages of the book, only 40 pages are devoted to folk culture.

I will not dwell here on the obvious cultural differences marking the fifty-six officially recognized nationalities, which have been the subjects of extensive scholarship in Europe and North America. Since the 1950s, so-called minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族) have provided the basis for claims to a Chinese kind of multi-culturalism. These differences do not seem to present much of a problem so long as issues of culture are isolated from issues of political identity and sovereignty. As with liberal multi-culturalism in the United States, official multi-culturalism in the People’s Republic of China represents an effort at cultural management that is driven ultimately by the goal of de-politicizing ethnicity. Prominent presently is the issue of ethnicity (or nationality) in relationship to globalization, with special attention to the issue of development and education. In the case of Tibet, as well as in the Northwestern provinces, the state seems to have discovered in capitalist development the most efficient means to assimilate recalcitrant nationalities.<sup>15</sup>

Less obvious are issues of regional differences in culture, which also seem to be attracting considerable attention; most importantly in the writing of regional, provincial and even place-based histories, but also in more abstract speculation over the question of culture. An eloquent example is provided by an article by Professor Tan Qixiang 譚其驤 of Fudan University published in 1987, entitled, “Temporal and Spatial Differences in Chinese culture.”<sup>16</sup> Tan minimized the differences between Chinese and Western societies, arguing that the exaggeration of differences between the two societies was due to the fact that most discussions simply proceeded as if they were comparing two societies, rather than two societies at different stages of development (feudal China and capitalist Europe, and only part of capitalist Europe, at that); if the comparisons focused on the same phases of historical development, the differences would seem much smaller. Chinese culture had undergone constant transformation over time, and, given the country’s size, exhibited significant regional differences. So-called Chinese civilization was the product of many nationalities. When

<sup>13</sup> Wang Xinting 王新婷, Jin Mingjuan 金鳴娟, and Yao Wanxia 姚晚霞, *Zhongguo chuantong wenhua gailun* 中國傳統文化概論 (Beijing 2004) [Second printing], p. 347.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307

<sup>15</sup> A recent article by Thomas Heberer suggests that this may not be working very well, as economic success seems to foster also a heightened sense of ethnic identity. See Thomas Heberer, “Ethnic Entrepreneurship and Ethnic Identity: A Case Study Among the Liangshan Yi (Nuosu) in China,” *China Quarterly* 182 (June 2005), pp. 407-427.

<sup>16</sup> Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, “Zhongguo wenhuade shidai chayi he diqu chayi” 中國文化的時代差異和地區差異, in Department of History, Fudan University (ed.), *Zhongguo chuantong wenhua zai jiantao* 中國傳統文化再檢討 (A Reexamination of Traditional Chinese Culture) (Shanghai 1987), vol. 1, pp. 27-55.



most people spoke of Chinese culture, they really meant Han culture. He added that, "Han culture itself had undergone ceaseless transformation; it was different from one period to another, and, within the same period, differed from place to place and region to region; there is no such thing as a common culture across time, and covering the whole of feudal society."<sup>17</sup> Tan's analysis is important, among other reasons, for drawing attention to the fact that what is routinely labeled Sino-centrism in China and abroad is better understood as Han-centrism.

A more recent work enumerates Northwest, Southwest, Jiangnan, the Southeast, Central China, North China and the Northeast as cultural regions that have preserved their particularities in spite of repeated attempts to merge all regions into one cultural whole.<sup>18</sup> Regional differences in culture, where they are not products of different ethnicities, are attributed in a work such as this one to differences of physical environment that characterize a sub-continental society. More interesting are those works that perceive such differences as historical products of interaction between different ways of life. Rather than the form that an expanding Han culture took in different environments, in other words, such interpretations point to interactions that went into the making of Han culture itself. Most of us are familiar with the classic works of Owen Lattimore and Wolfram Eberhard, among others, who have argued the importance of nomadic societies of the North in the formation of China.<sup>19</sup> A similar argument (with specific reference to Mongol nomads) has been put forth recently in a work that I cited above, *The Synthesis of Agriculture and Nomadism in the Formation of the Chinese Nation*, by Cai Fenglin 蔡風林, who writes that,

to research the historical formation of present-day China, it is necessary to adopt two standpoints; one is that of the agricultural region with its North-South axis lying in the central plains, the other is the nomadic region of the Northern grasslands. To understand this history, it is necessary to plant one foot in the central plains, the other in the grasslands, with a trans-Great Wall perspective. It will not do to look South with one's back to the Great Wall, and see only the agricultural regions of the Yellow River, the Yangtze, and the Pearl.<sup>20</sup>

The territorial frontier, and the Maritime frontiers of Guangdong and Fujian, provide obvious "contact zones" in the production of regional cultures.<sup>21</sup> One recent work goes much farther, to represent Chinese culture (and the Han people themselves) as

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Wu Cunhao 吳存浩 and Yu Yunhan 于云瀚, *Zhongguo wenhua shilüe* 中國文化史略 (Brief History of Chinese Culture) (Zhengzhou 2004), p. 14. We might remember here that Lee Denghui, the former President of Taiwan, angered the leadership in Beijing when he asserted that there were at least seven Chinas.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfram Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers: Social Forces in Medieval China* (Leiden 1952), and Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York 1940).

<sup>20</sup> Cai, pp. 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> For recent examples of cultural diversification in maritime regions, see Huang Shuping 黃淑娉, *Guangdong zuqun yu quyue wenhua yanjiu* 廣東族群與區域文化研究 (Research on Guangdong Regional Ethnicity) (Guangzhou 1999); Lin Jinshui 林金水 and Xie Bizhen 謝必震, *Fujian dui wai wenhua jiaoliu shi* 福建對外文化交流史 (History of Cultural Interactions Between Fujian and the Outside) (Fuzhou 1997).

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products of multiple contact zones of a people in constant motion. Entitled *Roots Within the Four Seas*, this work argues that not a sedentary society but migration was the most important element in the formation of Chinese culture, as migrants encountered one another to form not just regional but also place-based cultures.<sup>22</sup> The Han people themselves were constituted of all the ethnic groups from the Xiongnu 匈奴 and Xianbei 鮮卑 to Mongols and Manchus, so that the roots of the Han people reached all over the Eurasian continent. The reason Han ethnicity provided the dominant strain in the Chinese nation, and constituted one of the most populous and powerful ethnicities globally, was its ability to ceaselessly absorb other groups of people.<sup>23</sup> The remarkable reversal here is that of a Chinese people who are global in reach because they have been formed from the outside, not just culturally but also biologically. The inside and the outside become inextricably entangled in one another and, with the attenuation of difference between self and other, localized differences within become more visible than ever.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the author offers a justification of Han-centrism, which here qualifies for the place it holds in Chinese history not because it assimilates others, but because it absorbs them, gathering in cultural and political strength through the very absorption of difference.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to say how much such an argument owes to the increased visibility of Chinese Overseas, and the role they have played in the rapid economic development of the PRC over the last two decades.<sup>26</sup> Chinese migrants abroad provide only one

<sup>22</sup> Ge Jianxiong 葛劍雄 and An Jiesheng 安介生, *Sihai tonggen: yimin yu Zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 四海同根: 移民與中國傳統文化 (Identical Roots Within the Four Seas-Migration and Traditional Chinese Culture) (Taiyuan 2004).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>24</sup> Han absorption of others, and the part it played in the production of cultural differences, also provides the point of departure for a recently published 5-volume study of Han customs. See Xu Jiewu 徐杰舜, *Hanzu fengsu shi* 漢族風俗史 (History of Han Customs), 5 volumes (Shanghai 2004). One of the first works in US China scholarship to point to intra-Han differences as ethnic differences was Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity: Subei People in Shanghai, 1850-1980* (New Haven 1992). Honig's work is important because it does not dwell on obvious differences among Han populations (such as those of language and custom, as, for example, with the Punti/Hakka differences of South China), but on the economic and social production of difference among seemingly the same people. A similar argument, that insists that regional differences should be viewed as ethnic differences, has been offered more recently in Melissa J. Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese? The Impact of Culture, Power and Migration on Changing Identities* (Berkeley, CA 2004). The virtue of Brown's approach is in bringing collective social and political experience into the analysis of cultural formation. For another recent work, approaching the problem of local difference through political institution-building, see Elizabeth Remick, *Building Local States: China During the Republican and Post-Mao Eras* (Cambridge, MA 2004).

<sup>25</sup> It is noteworthy that this was the view on progress of one American anthropologist who was quite influential in the late 19th century. See W.J. McGee, "The Trend of Human Progress," *American Anthropologist* 1 (1989) 3, pp. 401-447. McGee's views were popularized through the 1904 St. Louis Fair, where he was in charge of the anthropological exhibit, the largest of its kind in pre-World War II World's Fairs.

<sup>26</sup> The distinguished Chinese intellectual, Li Shizeng, who himself was quite nomadic, similarly privileged migration, and proposed a new field of study, "qiaology" (or *qiaoxue* 僑學), which

part of the argument, and not the dominant part. But it is undeniable that the issues of culture raised by Chinese migrations also have played a significant part in the recognition of Chinese differences. Terms such as "Greater" or "Cultural" China that have become commonplaces of contemporary geopolitics implicitly repudiate the identification of the physical boundaries of "China" or "Chineseness" with the Mainland. Greater China brings in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the populations of Chinese origin in Southeast Asia, while Cultural China is global in scope, and in its reference to a so-called Chinese diaspora that somehow retains a fundamental cultural Chineseness against the very forces of history.<sup>27</sup> Such a notion of Chineseness carries with it strong racial presuppositions. The new visions of China and Chineseness are at once imperial in spatial pretensions, and deconstructive in their consequences. Spatial expansion of notions of Chineseness brings historical differences into the very interior of the idea of China, calling into question the idea of China as the articulation of a national or civilizational space marked either by a common destiny or a homogeneous culture. The "China Reconstructs" of an earlier day has been transformed in the title of a more recent study into "China Deconstructs," foregrounding the emergent importance of regional differences against pretensions to national unity.<sup>28</sup> And this is not just the doing of non-Chinese scholars of China, as the most important challenges to the idea of national or civilizational unity and homogeneity come from Taiwan and Hong Kong, bent on asserting their local identities against Beijing's imperial ambitions over territories deemed to be "historically" Chinese. Ideologically speaking, however, it seems to me that the more important effect of this new conceptualization of Chinese spaces is in fact the questioning of those historical claims – that the history of China may be grasped in terms of an expansion from the Central Plains outward when it may be exactly the reverse: that looking from the borderlands in is crucial to understanding the formation of so-called Chinese culture, which may be understood as a unified culture only in the sense of variations on common themes.<sup>29</sup>

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is best rendered as "diasporalogy." See Li Shizeng 李石曾, "Qiaoxue fafan" 僑學發凡 (Introduction to Diasporalogy), in *Li Shizeng xiansheng wenji* 李石曾先生文集 (Collection of Mr Li Shizeng's Writings) (Taipei 1980, pp. 291-341. Originally published in New York in *Ziyou shijie* 自由世界 (Free World), 1942.

- <sup>26</sup> Work of this kind has proliferated in recent years. For outstanding examples, see Tu Wei-ming (ed.), *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford, CA 1991), and Wang Gungwu, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore 1992). For "greater China," see also *China Quarterly*, No. 136, 1993 (Special Issue: "Greater China").
- <sup>27</sup> David S.G. Goodman and Gerald Segal, *China Deconstructs: Politics, Trade and Regionalism* (London 1994).
- <sup>29</sup> This perspective, too, is not entirely novel. It is a tribute to the power of the idea of a "middle kingdom," possibly even more powerful among Euro/Americans than among Chinese themselves, that persuasive evidence of cultural formation through interactions stretching across Asia has not succeeded in dislodging it from historical or political analysis. Wolfram Eberhard, Owen Lattimore, and Edward H. Schafer stand out as three of the foremost scholars drawing attention to this perspective. For important examples of their works, see Eberhard, *Conquerors and Rulers: Social Forces in Medieval China* (Leiden 1952); Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York 1940); and Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1963). For more recent noteworthy examples, see Liu Xinru, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People* (Delhi 1998);

There is an important recognition here that earlier notions of Chinese culture-textbook as well as popular notions identified Chinese culture with a textual culture, and textual culture with a national identity as Chinese, meaning mostly the culture of the elite. Such identification has done much to disguise the complexity of Eastern Asian cultural formations that has persisted despite political colonization from imperial centers, which also would suggest that the cultural formations of this region are best grasped in ecumenical terms, rather than by the extension to the past of claims of recent origin, most importantly nationalism.

### The Burdens of History: Culture and Overdetermination

My rehearsal of the historicity, boundary instabilities, and internal differences – if not fragmentations – of nations, civilizations and continents is intended to underline the historiographically problematic nature of cultural histories organized around such units. These entities are products of efforts to bring political or conceptual order to the world, and represent political and conceptual strategies of containment. This order is achieved only at the cost of suppressing alternative spatialities and temporalities, however, as well as covering over processes that went into their making.

It may not be very surprising that as global forces, including forces of empire, produce economic and cultural processes, and human motions, that undermine modernity's strategies of containment, we have witnessed a proliferation of spaces, as well as of claims to different temporalities. Perhaps it is living in a state of flux that predisposes intellectual life presently to stress motion and process over stable containers; traveling theorists are given to traveling theories, as cultural critics from Edward Said to James Clifford have suggested by word or example.<sup>30</sup> What is important is that we are called upon to face an obligation to view the past differently, to open up an awareness of what was suppressed in a historiography of order, and take note of the importance of human activity, including intellectual and cultural activity, in creating the world.

At the same time, in a world that seems to be caught up in a maelstrom created by forces that are productive at once of homogenization and heterogenization, history seems to be receding rapidly into the past, even as the past returns to make claims on the present – “resurgence of history,” as the French writer Jean-Marie Guehenno puts it in his study of the decline of the authority of the nation-state under the assault of forces of globalization and the resurgence in response of a consciousness of the lo-

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Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu, HI 2003); and Charles Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C. – A.D. 907* (Honolulu, HI 2001). It is interesting that the last two works, devoted to demonstrating the importance of commercial and religious interactions in producing the societies and regions in question, nevertheless, continue to project upon the past the modern vocabulary of nations and regions (such as India and China) which attests, I think, to the power of modern ways of mapping history, as well as to the dilemmas presented by the very vocabulary of historical and cultural analysis.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Said, “Traveling Theory,” in Edward W. Said, *The World, The Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA 1983), pp. 226–247; James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar (eds.), *Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists*. Special issue of *Inscriptions* No. 5 (1989).

cal.<sup>31</sup> The world of Global Modernity witnesses a return of civilizational and cultural claims, bolstered, ironically, by the same destabilizing forces of transborder ethnicities and diasporas, and calling for alternative epistemologies and alternative claims to historical consciousness. This is the case not just with different civilizations, such as they are. Different epistemological claims mark cultural struggles over the future of the same civilization, as in the resurgence of biblical attacks in the United States on science and history – as in the bible-inspired history of the world written by James Ussher, *Annals of the World*,<sup>32</sup> popular among evangelicals and, apparently, an inspiration behind the proliferating Creation museums and theme parks across the United States. So-called culture wars in the US since the 1980s point to the cultural contradictions that need to be suppressed in order to keep alive the myths of cultural homogeneity in civilizational or national units of social organization. These contradictions mark encounters not only between different nations, nationalities or ethnic units, but also between classes, genders and races, with the different social, political and cultural spaces they imply.

One historian of China has written cogently if somewhat simplistically of “rescuing history from the nation.”<sup>33</sup> Cogent because the “nationalization” of history has indeed been of primary significance in shaping understanding of the spaces of history, if not the denial of history as such. A political idea to which the legitimation of history is crucial, the nation has sought to disguise its historicity by projecting itself across the knowable past – a kind of colonization of history that corresponds to nation-formation itself as a colonizing process. From a historiographical perspective, a national perspective on the past, including the national past, is woefully inadequate as some of the most important forces in the shaping of the past transcend national boundaries. The same may be said of a world history that is conceived in terms of nations and civilizations.

The denial of the nation is also simplistic, however, because it does not recognize that while the nation itself is historical, which may make the national space into an “artifice of history,” it nevertheless carries all the force of a historical reality. We may dismiss nations, civilizations and continents, and much else besides, as constructs of one way or another, but there is no denying that despite all the criticism, they refuse to go away, partly because of their continued importance in the realities of culture and politics, and partly because of the important place they hold in the political and cultural unconscious, including the unconscious of scholars, who still seem to think nothing of terms like “uniting East and West,” or “Asian perspectives,” to cite two recent examples from my own campus. Besides, the space of the nation is not the only space that history needs to be rescued from, and not all phenomena lend themselves easily to understanding outside the context of the nation. Some may even suffer a distortion when forced into transnational or translocal frameworks; issues of democracy, citizenship and civil society readily come to mind. This qualification may be especially important when we consider the public pedagogical functions of history.

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*. Trans. from the French by Victoria Elliott (Minneapolis, MN 1995).

<sup>31</sup> James Ussher, Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce, *Annals of the World* (Green Forest, AR 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago 1995).

The issue here is not merely national against transnational or world history, but the proliferation of space that attends the de-privileging of conventional modes of conceiving of historical spaces. The very deconstruction of national or civilizational spaces, in other words, raises the question of how to reconstruct history spatially and temporally, if that is indeed a desirable goal. Culture understood in its materiality leads inevitably to the privileging of difference as a condition of cultural existence. But does that mean that localized appreciations of culture can dispense with larger civilizational and national formations of culture, and erase their historical and political importance, as nationalist and civilizationist ideologies have sought to erase place-based cultural phenomena and orientations? I think not. There may be no objective standard to decide what weight to give to the claims of difference, be they temporal/spatial or social, against claims to unity, be they national or civilizational, but there is no denying their co-presence, if only as ideological convictions, and the part they play in shaping social and political behavior and, therefore, the outcomes of history. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to briefly sort out the challenges they present in the formulation of a non-reductionist analysis of culture.

The association of culture with civilization is mediated through textual traditions, and is quite obviously tied in historically with elites whose allegiances transcend political boundaries. In the instance at hand, most discussions of traditional Chinese culture, including those that I have cited above, identify Chinese culture with philosophical and religious traditions (most importantly Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism). These traditions bridged the gap between classes and genders differently, and to different degrees, but they did make for commonalities without abolishing difference. To this extent, they may be viewed as constituents of a national culture. On the other hand, it would be misleading to reduce them to a national culture, or to contain them within any particular national boundary. In their appeal and historical diffusion across "national" spaces, they are indeed viewed more properly as common East, Southeast and Central Asian than as Chinese traditions.

Against the preoccupation of civilization with texts, nationalism has created an urge to identify essences. If modern nationalism appropriates the texts of civilization as characteristics of a Chinese (or even a Han) nationality, it can do so only by anachronistically projecting a modern national consciousness upon the past – which is not irrelevant for being anachronistic, as such appropriation is historically consequential in serving significant political purposes. But the national cultural project faces a predicament of its own. In identifying national culture with the textual traditions of the elite, which it seeks to impose upon the nation as a whole in order to achieve national cultural homogeneity, nationalism reveals itself as a colonizing project. On the other hand, to be plausible (and distinguishable from the civilizational project), the national cultural project also must open up to the culture of the population, which brings into its interior the differences that are built into the social constitution of the nation the differences that I have discussed above, from spatial to social differences, and differences in the practice of everyday life. We might ponder, in this regard, efforts in East Asia in the course of the twentieth century to articulate textual traditions to the demands of imagined national characteristics in the production of nationalized versions of those traditions.

Finally, the effort to create national traditions through the articulation of textual traditions to the demands of everyday life – culture in its materiality – have been only partially successful, as spatial and social difference in cultural practices once again assert themselves as globalization and transnationalism de-privilege the nation, providing new spaces of self-expression for cultural practices marginalized by claims of nation and civilization.

### Cultures in Motion: Transnationalism and Cultural Ecumenes

What all this implies is that a non-reductionist approach to cultural analysis calls for an appreciation of cultural practises in their multiple determinations by textual traditions as they have been integrated into everyday life differentially among classes and genders, ideological self-identifications in which national self-identification still plays a powerful part, and the experiences and practices of everyday life which define the particularity of political and social space. The question is how to re-conceive spatialities in order to accommodate culture in its overdetermination, as a marker of commonality and difference, as well as fixity and fluidity. By way of conclusion, I would like to put forth three considerations.

First is the necessity of avoiding the tendency, visible most prominently with nationalism, of attaching culture to homogenizing conceptions of people and territory. A concomitant of this tendency is the urge to find an essence that serves to fulfill this relationship by defining a common identity for the people and territory thus conceived. It is not coincidental that one of the most important publications that appeared with the awakening of nationalism in the late Qing was entitled *National Essence Journal* (*Guocui xuebao* 國粹學報), or that in more complicated form, Revival of National Studies (*Guoxue* 國學) has accompanied a revival of cultural nationalism in the 1990s. As noted above, it is almost habitual with most writing on culture in the PRC to recognize difference as a fundamental feature of sub-continental China, and then to proceed nevertheless to define a Chinese culture that unifies all (usually through a few highly-generalized characterizations), as if those differences mattered little in cultural self-identification. An eloquent example of this attitude is offered by the 1958 “Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World” (*Wei Zhongguo wenhua jinggao shijie renshi xuanyan* 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言), signed by prominent Confucian scholars, which declared that,

... In referring to Chinese culture, we are referring to its “single stemmed-ness” [*yibing xing* 一柄性]. This “single stemmedness” is what is referred to as “Chinese culture.” In its origins, it is a single system. This single system does not deny its many roots. This is analogous to the situation in ancient China where there were different cultural areas. This did not, however, impede the main thread of its single line of transmission ... . Moreover, the periods of political division and unity never adversely affected the general convergent thread of China’s culture and

thought. This is what is referred to as the “successive transmission of the interconnecting thread of the way” (*daotong* 道統).<sup>34</sup>

Not surprisingly, not only is Chinese culture identified here with Confucian culture, Confucian culture itself is represented by a single line of orthodox transmission that erases the complexities of Confucianism itself. Contemporary discussions of Chinese tradition, some of which I have cited above, often follows a similar model where the recognition of difference is overruled by the assertion of cultural characteristics that define the nation. In all these cases, textual culture, the culture of the elite provides these characterizations of cultural legacy, as it is at that level that it is possible to make a plausible case for national cultural homogeneity. But such views, however important they may be for political purposes, not only cover up important differences within Chinese society, but also serve a cultural exclusionism that on occasion takes the form of the active suppression of cultural difference. How to speak about cultural commonalities of China and Chinese without complicity in the political suppression of cultural difference is a major challenge in formulating a notion of Chinese culture that is both deconstructive and reconstructive.

Second, therefore, is the challenge presented by transnationality in our conceptualization of historical processes. A distinction is necessary here between world-wide or global and transnational, as the two point to different spatialities.<sup>35</sup> The transnational is not the same as world-wide. World-wide as concept can still accommodate such units as nations, cultures and civilizations as principles of organization. What makes “transnational” radical in its implications is its emphasis on processes over settled units. More importantly, perhaps, the other side of challenging national history from supra-national perspectives is to bring to the surface sub-national histories of various kinds. The radical challenge of transnational history itself lies in its conjoining of the supra- and the sub (or intra)-national – which calls forth an understanding of transnational as translocal, with all its subversive implications historiographically and politically. If national history serves as an ideological “strategy of containment,” the containment of the translocal – as process or structure – is of immediate and strategic importance as it bears directly on the determination and consolidation of national boundaries. The translocal presents challenges that are quite distinct from the multicultural, which has been attached to world history, as one of its political and cultural goals. The difference may be the difference between placing national history in the perspective of the world versus abolishing it (or at least cutting it down to size among other histories). Translocal also draws attention to “contact zones,” in the sense sug-

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in John Makeham, “The New *Daotong*,” in John Makeham (ed.), *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* (New York 2003), p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> For examples of transnationality, by no means bound to projects of “world history,” see Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC 2002); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism. A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton 1997); John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley, CA 2003); John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World, 1650–1900* (Montreal 2003). Most works viewed as world history should, less misleadingly, be described as transnational or translocal histories. That they are not points to the hold on the imagination of “world history” of past legacies.



gested above, which serve as crucial locations for the production of cultures and cultural spaces.

For these reasons, thirdly, it is very important to reconceive nations and civilizations not as homogeneous units but as historical ecumenes.<sup>36</sup> This is readily evident in the case of civilizations conceived in terms of religions, which is the usual association for the term. The volume edited by Michael Adas, *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order*, provides a good example.<sup>37</sup> The historian Jerry Bentley suggests in a recent paper that an ecumenical approach is necessary to overcoming the Eurocentrism of world history. His intention is most importantly ethical. The concept of "ecumene," however, may also be translated into a way to grasp spatialities. The idea of the ecumenical may be applied productively to regions, civilizations and continents, among other large entities, as well as to nations; the important issue being the foregrounding of commonalities as well as differences, and recognizing a multiplicity of spatialities within a common space marked not by firm boundaries but by the intensity and concentration of interactions, which themselves are subject to historical fluctuations. Such an understanding of ecumene accords with the term's etymological origins, meaning the inhabited or inhabitable world, which is how peoples from the Greeks to Europeans to the Chinese conceived of the world, which did not encompass the world as we understand it, but referred only to the world that mattered. It was modernity that invented one world out of the many worlds of earlier peoples, and even that has been thrown into doubt by so-called globalization that unifies the known globe, but also fragments it along fractures old and new.

If I may illustrate by an example, there has been much talk in recent years of a Confucian or Neo-Confucian Eastern Asia, and, of course, Confucianism long has been held to be a hallmark of a Chinese civilization that holds the central place of hegemony in Eastern Asia. It is interesting to contemplate when Confucius became Chinese; when he was rendered from a Zhou Dynasty sage into one of the points of departure for a civilization conceived in national terms. When the Japanese, Koreans and Vietnamese adopted Confucianism for their own purposes, all the time claiming their own separate identity, did they do so to become part of the Sung or Yuan or Ming, whom they resisted strenuously, or because they perceived in Confucianism values of statecraft and social organization that was lodged in the texts of a tradition that was more a classical than a Chinese tradition, and which unfolded differently in these different states.<sup>38</sup> This is what I have in mind when I refer to commonality as

<sup>36</sup> "Ecumene" understood as "areas of intense and sustained cultural interaction." This definition is offered by John and Jean Comaroff on the basis of works by Ulf Hannerz and Igor Kopytoff. See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," Special issue of *Public Culture* 12 (2000) 2, p. 294. The concept of ecumene in a different sense was first applied to China in a 1968 *Habilitation*. See Peter Weber-Schäfer, *Oikumene und Imperium. Studien zur Ziviltheologie des chinesischen Kaiserreichs* (Ecumene and Imperium: Studies in Chinese Imperial Civil Theology) (München 1968). I am grateful to Prof. Roman Malek for bringing this work to my attention.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia, PA 1993).

<sup>38</sup> For the most up-to-date, comprehensive and illuminating discussions of these issues, see Benjamin A. Elman, John B. Duncan, and Herman Ooms (eds.), *Rethinking Confucianism: Past and*

well as difference, even radical difference. It could be complicated further by the extension of the argument to the entanglement of societies in a multiplicity of ecumenes. What we call China itself did not simply grow from the inside out, radiating out from a Yellow River plains core, but was equally a product in the end of forces that poured in from the outside, from different directions, producing translocal spaces. These interactions of the inside and the outside produced the China we have come to know, which once formed, would contain them, and push their memories to the margins. Their recovery toward the center of historical inquiry recasts the history of China in more ways than one as I noted above.

In underlining the overdetermination of parts that resist dissolution into homogenized wholes, my goal is not to do away with history by rendering it into a conglomeration of micro-histories. I merely wish to illustrate what a radical and thoroughgoing historicism might lead to. As Charles Holcombe has argued, what we call Eastern Asia, no less than the nations it contains, is a product of historical interactions that produced the region as we have come to know it. And if it has a beginning, sometime around the turn of the first millennium A.D., there is no reason to think that the region as we have come to know it should be invested with the longevity of eternity. The region is in the midst of radical transformations once again in our day as its "global connections" create new kinds of differences to disturb the variety of commonalities that have given it shape in recent centuries.<sup>39</sup>

The paradigm, or metaphor, of ecumene is one that may be used productively in many cases. One of its advantages is that it also allows for different parts of the ecumene to react differently – and autonomously – with parts of different ecumenes. Regions may in some instances serve similar functions, but an ecumene conceived not in terms of physical proximity but social and cultural constructions may also be deployed across vast distances as, for example, with the crucial interconnections between the Sinic and the Indic ecumenes that played such an important part in the formation of the areas we have been discussing. The socialist and revolutionary movements of the 20th century provided similar interconnections. Incorporation of the region within a capitalist economy and colonialism created new relationships within the region, and in its relationships to what is "outside." What long-term legacies they may have left remains to be seen. In our day, the connections that crisscross the region and beyond extend globally once again, as migrant populations from the region spread across the globe.

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*Present in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam* (Los Angeles, CA 2002). Noting the anachronism of using the term "China," with reference to the past, a recent work notes that, "... in traditional times, the people who participated in this core civilization did not think of it as 'Chinese' civilization – in contrast to other alternative, non-Chinese civilizations – so much as simply the universal standard of civilization." Holcombe, *The Genesis of East Asia, 221 B.C. – A.D. 907*, p. 10. The habit, and the limitations of vocabulary are so powerful, however, that Holcombe himself cannot resist referring to the civilization in question repeatedly as "Chinese civilization!"

<sup>39</sup> Holcombe, Chapter 4.