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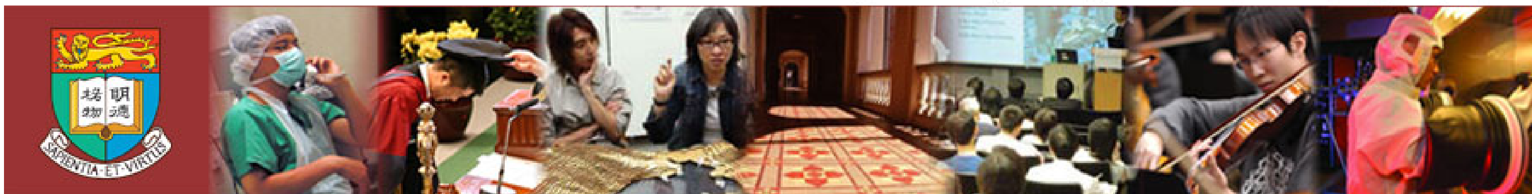

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THE RENEGOTIATION OF CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE POST-MAO ERA

A public lecture delivered at
the University of Hong Kong
on 19 March 1991

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Fairbank Professor of Chinese Society
and Professor of Anthropology,
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THE RENEGOTIATION OF CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE POST-MAO ERA*

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Introduction

In this lecture I will be focusing on a question that has dominated Chinese politics since the May 4th movement and probably much earlier: what is it that constitutes the true essence of Chinese cultural identity?

Today in the aftermath of the Beijing massacre this question has taken on a special urgency. Many younger Chinese of my acquaintance have come to the depressing, nihilistic conclusion that the aging autocrats of Zhongnanhai may represent the core of China's traditional culture. If so, they argue, it is time to start all over again and build an entirely new culture. On Taiwan, opposition leaders are forcing large numbers of people to reexamine their own cultural identity - can one be 'Chinese' and also 'Taiwanese'? What about the long-suffering residents of Hong Kong? In what sense are the citizens of this territory 'Chinese'? What, if anything, do all of these people share? How should one define 'Chineseness' in the post-modern, post-socialist, post-CNN world?

This is, of course, an absurdly ambitious topic for a fieldworking anthropologist to address, especially someone who is most comfortable in villages - far from the centers of power. One might also ask what an American-born, Caucasian outsider is doing holding forth on the subject of 'Chineseness'? This is not an unfair criticism: questions regarding the personal background of fieldworkers have influenced American anthropology in a big way of late, causing great angst among younger scholars: how does one represent the 'other', namely those who live in other societies,

other times, or other cultures?

These questions relate to the age-old debates regarding insider versus outsider perspectives, or emic versus etic in the jargon of anthropology. Twenty years ago it was taken as an article of faith among anthropologists that the outsider had certain methodological advantages, but this received wisdom has been subjected to intensive attack in recent years.

Anthropologists have also come under the influence (some would say the pall) of post-modernist critical studies in American academe - beginning with the spillover from Edward Said's classic study, *Orientalism*, and continuing with an avalanche of studies that challenge the 'authority' of anthropologists (or any scholars) to adequately represent those of other cultures.

So, I stand here today in a state of angst. This is perhaps appropriate given that I am concerned with a culture that is also, rather obviously, in a state of angst. I want, therefore, to make clear that I speak as an outsider and I make no claims to privileged insight.

We will begin with the political drama of Tiananmen Square, the Spring Democracy Movement of 1989. I was not there, in body, but I was 'there', spiritually, along with millions of other Americans, riveted to my TV screen, watching the live broadcasts on CNN (Cable News Network). The television images of Chinese students demonstrating in Beijing were so electrifying that they gave viewers the vicarious thrill of participating in a momentous historical 'event'. The Tiananmen demonstrations will no doubt be recognized by future historians as the crowning moment in the post-modern era of the late 20th century.

The live broadcasts were multivariant in their symbolism - and irony. Twenty-two years earlier the same square was the venue for another set of demonstrations representing the Red Guard generation. The goals and public rhetoric of the two historical movements were radically different but one important symbol remained constant: the enigmatic portrait of Mao Zedong still looms over the square. When vandals attacked the portrait on 23 May 1989, students reacted with anger and expressed great concern that this act might be used as a pretext for troops to clear the square. Said one, 'Mao was a good guy. There was no need to abuse him like that' (*New York Times*, 24 May 1989).

Here, in the heat of a political movement, we witness the process by which history is reconstructed. For many Chinese that same image conjures up unpleasant memories of the Cultural Revolution. During my first trip to China in the late 1970s, Mao's portrait was

everywhere. Today, aside from Tiananmen Square, one is hard pressed to find depictions of Mao displayed in public. Two gigantic statues of Mao were removed from the campus of Peking University only 12 months prior to the spring demonstrations (for a description of the demolition see the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17 November 1988). The statues had become an embarrassment for a generation of teachers and administrators who had participated - some as persecutors, others as 'bad class' victims - in the Cultural Revolution. On 23 May 1989, however, a new generation of students too young to remember the 1960s had appropriated the memory of Mao for their own purposes. He had been transformed into a symbol of selflessness and rectitude in an era characterized by corruption, alienation, and self doubt. One wonders whether this reinterpretation of Mao as an emblem of protest will be pursued and developed by future leaders. Stranger things have happened in the representation of public personalities since 1949.

The public sufferings of the hunger strikers (*jueshizhe*) was another powerful image that television made immediate and tangible. And this, of course, is precisely the point: fasting is a political act that conveys an unmistakable message to the world at large. In fact, given their expectation that the state-controlled media in China would deny them access to the Chinese people, it seems likely that the Beijing students chose consciously to appeal to an international television audience. The news of young people courting death through fast could then be sent back to China, literally over the heads of party authorities, by the VOA and BBC. As it turned out both Chinese print media and, to a limited extent, local television broadcast the news of the hunger strike. (See also the extraordinarily detailed and sympathetic account of the student movement in the 29 May 89 issue of *Beijing Review*, vol. 32, no. 22.) But there can be little doubt that satellite broadcasts of the fasting, complete with howling sirens and fainting students, by CNN, CBS, and other foreign networks had much to do with the creation of an international media event - which, in turn, helped student leaders convert the small-scale demonstrations into China's most serious political crisis since the death of Mao and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976.

Foreign Symbols in a Chinese Political Drama

But why fasting? Why did Beijing students choose a form of political protest that is essentially foreign? There are, of course, parallels in Chinese history. During the Ming-Qing transition an exemplary official, Liu Zongzhou (1578-1645), fasted for 20 days, killing himself to protest the rise of Manchu authority. The *Shiji* records two legendary heroes of the Zhou dynasty, Boyi and Shuqi, who starved to death in a protest against political injustice.[1] In more modern times,

however, hunger strikes have not been a central feature of the Chinese cultural repertoire. According to Chinese colleagues, there were few celebrated precedents during the May 4th Movement, the anti-Japanese protests, or the civil war era. Fasting plays a central role in the modern political history of Korea (Kim Kwang-ok, personal communication) but not, apparently, in China. (But see Hinton 1972:91 for hunger striking as a political tactic during the Cultural Revolution; there have also been reports of hunger strikes among Shanghai textile workers in the 1930s. I am grateful to Paul Cohen and Elizabeth Perry for this information.)

Judging from the visual images and from the verbal messages conveyed by students in the square, it seems likely that the cultural models for the Beijing actions were Ghandi's anti-imperialist fasts and the hunger strikes associated with the Korean student protests - both of which are often depicted in the Chinese media. I will return to the question of foreign symbols and Chinese cultural identity in the conclusion of this talk.

Few who have lived or worked in China during the past five or six years can fail to notice the high level of alienation and despair that characterizes intellectual life, even prior to the 1989 crackdown. This is partly a consequence of frozen salaries and rising inflation. Meanwhile, the entire society seems to have plunged headlong into the pursuit of personal affluence. Intellectuals have had to join the scramble for new sources of income (e.g. by marketing their foreign language and management skills) or stand aside and watch their standard of living fall below that of workers with minimal education. Financial problems are obviously important but teachers, writers, and researchers are also deeply concerned about the evolution of Chinese culture in the post-Mao era. The self-sacrificing ethic of the early communist movement (1949-57) appealed to many intellectuals who participated in the construction of a new socialist culture. Having seen these dreams shattered during the late 1950s and 1960s they had high hopes for the reforms instituted in the late 1970s. After 10 years of reform, however, there is still no agreement on what kind of society China is to become. The communist party has lost credibility and its leaders are incapable of enlisting mass support for a new vision of the future. Equally alarming to many intellectuals is the prospect that China has abandoned its past in an effort to join the modern world.

It is unclear whether ordinary Chinese workers and farmers share the intellectuals' sense of despair about the future or the present. In my own research (1985, 1986, 1988) among rural peoples of Guangdong and Jiangsu quite the opposite impression emerged, namely that farmers were delighted with the economic reforms. It is true, of course, that my field work has concentrated in two of China's wealthiest areas (the Pearl River Delta and the Jiangnan region);

the same sense of buoyancy may not prevail in the North China Plain.

In the past, prior to the reforms, to be sent to the countryside was equated with lifelong exile and poverty. Today, ironically, certain rural areas (e.g. Guangdong's Zhongshan and Xinhui Xian) are attracting illegal migrants from northern cities; these itinerants do not speak Cantonese and work for wages that no self-respecting Guangdong farmer would even consider accepting. In some parts of China, therefore, the countryside is losing its stigmatized image.

It seems possible that two, separate cultural systems may be emerging, one in the cities and another in the countryside. Before pursuing this proposition, however, more needs to be said about the nature of cultural identity in Chinese society.

In my opening statement I asked: in what sense is post-Mao Chinese culture 'Chinese?' Today I intend to examine the question from an anthropological perspective. 'Culture' in this context is not a reflection (exclusively) of the arts, literature, and philosophy. Rather, the term culture as employed here is intimately related to perceptions of appropriate lifestyle - this, in turn, is incorporated into one's sense of personal identity. Culture is embedded in family patterns, religious beliefs, political attitudes, and in the rituals of everyday life. Furthermore, culture, like one's sense of identity, is constantly changing.

Contemporary definitions of culture have been adapted to fit the fluid, boundary-defying expectations of the post-modern world. Most anthropologists now see culture as a set of symbolic representations and expectations that people must *construct* for themselves.[2] It is no longer perceived as a list of traits inherited passively from ancestors in preordained or immutable form, as earlier Tylorian notions would lead us to expect (see Hatch 1973:20-4). Culture in today's world has to be negotiated, transacted, and achieved. This approach thus stresses the active participation of people who cooperate - some willingly, others not - to create an acceptable culture. State authorities are, of course, directly involved in this creative process but, in the end, it is the acceptance and routinization of cultural forms by ordinary people that matters most.

Since 1949 the Chinese people have experienced two or three traumatic attempts to destroy key elements of their 'traditional' (i.e. presocialist) culture. Closely associated with these movements have been state-sponsored campaigns to construct competing versions of a new socialist culture - the most notable being the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution launched in 1966. An earlier and in some respects more far-reaching campaign to obliterate the old and fabricate the new

occurred during the Great Leap Forward (1958-60). If anything was made clear by these movements it was that China's presocialist culture was, and to a certain extent still is, a very hard nut to crack.

Cultural Identity in Late Imperial and Republican Era China

In comparison to other premodern, agrarian societies there can be little doubt that late imperial China exhibited a high degree of cultural integration. Serious divisions based on kinship, ethnicity, and regional loyalties did, of course, exist in China but - unlike Europe or South Asia - the dominant historical theme is one of ever increasing incorporation and cooptation. One need only read Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976) to appreciate just how integrated China was during its late imperial era. Weber's account of the period immediately preceding World War I (1870-1914) makes it clear that the idea of 'France' as a modern nation state, with a shared culture and a corporate identity that tied all citizens together, did not exist until it was consciously created by Parisian social engineers for the purposes of national mobilization. Benedict Anderson's speculations on the origins of modern nationalism (1983) are also relevant here: the Chinese at the turn of the 20th century could not 'imagine' the state as an integral part of their personal identity but they had no difficulty identifying with the abstraction we might call 'Chinese civilization'.

In China the notion of a unified culture predated, and made possible, the fabrication of a modern Chinese state following the collapse of the imperial order in 1911. People of all stations in life - peasants, workers, landlords, merchants, officials - already related to China's grand tradition with its ancient history. For ordinary Chinese this abstraction was concretized and represented in everyday discourse as the 'civilized' or appropriate way of life; those who did not follow accepted norms were defined as 'uncivilized' (*meiwenhuade, yehmande*). Notions of civility, conformity, and order are thus at the heart of what all Chinese accepted as the irreducible basis of their cultural identity. The point I wish to emphasize is that the vast majority of Chinese, irrespective of class background, life experience, or education shared this vision of the acceptable way of life during the late imperial era (there were, of course, dissenters, such as the Taiping rebels and members of various Daoist sects). The notion of a shared culture began to unravel during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in the May 4th Movement, but this idea of corporate identity survived for most people until the political campaigns of the communist era.

How does one explain the development of a shared culture on such a grand scale? Some have stressed the role of an ideographic[3] (i.e. non-phonetic) script that cuts across speech communities, thereby allowing educated people from different regions to share a common literary/philosophical tradition (see e.g. Ho 1976:551-4). Others have argued that it was the autocratic power of the Chinese state, projected through a complex bureaucracy, that held the society together (e.g. Wittfogel 1957). Still others point to China's elaborate hierarchy of commercial centers and marketing communities as the key to cultural unity (Skinner 1985). All of these explanations are, of course, correct. One cannot conceive of 'China,' or the abstraction we call Chinese culture, without a common script, a centralized state, and a complex hierarchy of central places.

My own approach to the problem of cultural identity is rather more down to earth and stresses two interrelated features of everyday life: (1) a shared oral tradition, and (2) the central role of ritual. During the late imperial era everyone - from the emperor in Beijing to the lowly duckherd in the Pearl River Delta - celebrated important life transitions with the same set of rites. They also shared essentially the same oral tradition, expressed in folktales, myths, and legends. Alas, in this lecture I do not have time to elaborate on this theme of shared oral tradition; I will concentrate instead on the domain of ritual.

The Role of Ritual in the Construction of 'Chineseness'

Let us begin with a question that is deceptively simple but devilishly complex once one begins to dig: what makes Chinese culture 'Chinese'? What, in other words, are the basic elements of the cultural equation that allowed some residents of that vast country to call themselves Chinese (*han*) and be accepted as such, while other peoples were labelled 'barbarian' (*fan*, or more politely *xiaoshu minzu*, minority peoples).[4] The set of cultural attributes that made one Chinese appears to have had little to do with a shared creed or set of prescribed religious beliefs. There was never a unified clergy in China charged with the responsibility of dispensing truth, as in Christendom. The closest parallel to the Western church hierarchy in China was the imperial bureaucracy but Chinese officials were relatively few in number and were preoccupied with the practical aspects of governance, not religious beliefs.

In examining the processes of cultural construction it is perhaps best to focus on the distinction between Han and non-Han. Most people ordinarily present this as a straight-forward dichotomy: one either is or is not Han. The key diagnostic feature here is whether a set of people are

deemed to have *wen*, variously translated as civilization, learning, or elegance. In historical terms, however, the distinction between Han and non-Han was never so simple, particularly in the south (see Faure 1989:8-14 on Han/Yao interactions in Guangdong). Over the centuries whole populations, on the order of European states, have made the transformation from non-Han to Han (Eberhard 1982:105-47, Wiens 1954:130-226). More recently, in the wake of post-Mao reforms, certain groups that had been recognized as Han are seeking to reclaim - and, in the process, reconstruct - earlier non-Han identities (see e.g. Wu 1989). These labels, therefore, are purely cultural and are not racial or biological in any obvious sense.

To be Chinese in this context meant that one played by the rules of the dominant culture. What, then, were the rules of the game? How did groups *become* Chinese and maintain their 'Chineseness?' From the perspective of ordinary people, to be Chinese was to understand and accept the view that there was a correct way to live one's life. This was reflected most directly in the enactment of public rituals associated with the life cycle - namely the rites of birth, marriage, death, and ancestorhood. Correct performance of these rites was one clear and unambiguous method of distinguishing the civilized from the uncivilized or, when considering marginal peoples, the cooked from the uncooked.[5] Put another way, practice rather than belief was what made one Chinese in the eyes of others.

As an example of the principles involved one can cite the complex rituals surrounding death in China. Based on a survey of ethnographic evidence I have elsewhere concluded that the basic form of funeral rites is (or was) similar throughout the empire (Watson 1988). There were, of course, interesting regional variations but, in general, all Chinese performed the same sequence of ritual acts at funerals - from the poorest farmer to the emperor himself (see Rawski 1988b on imperial rites). This sequence of acts might be called the elementary structure of Chinese funerary ritual; the proper performance of the sequence distinguished civilized from uncivilized rites.

Orthopraxy versus Orthodoxy in the Ritual Context

Over my twenty-plus years of field research in Hong Kong and China, I have observed hundreds of rites associated with death. It has become obvious (to me, at least) that correct practice (orthopraxy) and not correct belief (orthodoxy) was paramount in the ritual arena. In my experience cynics, agnostics, and active nonbelievers participated in funeral rites along with those who professed strong faith in the efficacy of the acts. Those who would refuse to follow

accepted procedure were consciously isolating themselves from the community and, hence, withdrawing from the dominant culture. It is interesting in this regard that many Cantonese Christians managed to perform the rites according to accepted sequence, even though the oral/textual part of the funeral conformed to Christian expectations.

By emphasizing orthopraxy, I do not mean to imply that beliefs are somehow irrelevant to the construction of 'Chineseness'. This is obviously not the case, and any anthropologist can talk for days about the belief system that underpins traditional rites.

Important as these beliefs were, however, it was anxiety over the practice of the rites, in the correct sequence, that took precedence over discussions of meaning or symbolism in the everyday discourse of ordinary people. This does not mean that there was no variation in performance. As long as the acts were accomplished in the approved sequence, there was room for infinite variety in ritual expression.

Herein lies the genius of the (pre-socialist) Chinese approach to cultural construction: the system allowed for a high degree of variation within an overarching structure of unity. The rites associated with the final disposal of the corpse constitute an excellent example of this principle (variation within unity). Once the sealed coffin is removed from the community in the accepted fashion (by a procession marking the last of the prescribed funeral acts), mourners are free to dispose of the corpse according to local custom. There was, in other words, no elementary structure of disposal that applied to China as a whole (i.e. funeral rites were carefully prescribed, burial rites were not).

In Guangdong, Fukien, and Taiwan secondary burial - the storage of exhumed bones in pots - was common (see e.g. Ahern 1973:163-219, Ling 1955, Watson 1982). On numerous occasions I have witnessed northern cadres recoil in absolute horror when the purpose of Cantonese bone pots is explained to them. Until recently, northerners did things that revolted southerners, such as storing coffins above ground, sometimes for decades, awaiting an auspicious burial date (Ebrey n.d., Naquin 1988).

Given their political centrality, it is surely significant that rites of disposal were never subject to renegotiation and modification in the pursuit of a unified cultural identity. The exclusion of burial rites from the roster of prescribed rituals can thus be seen as an implicit concession to ethnic and regional sensitivities. This may well have been the consequence of a conscious policy by imperial officials and educated elites, given that any attempt to control burial practices would

have been disastrously expensive and impossible to enforce - as communist authorities were to discover during the 1950s and 1960s.

Following the standard funeral sequence, by contrast, did not challenge local elites who for centuries had verified territorial claims by 'placing' the remains of ancestors in the landscape (cf. Bloch 1971). As long as disposal was not affected, the funeral rites (which are performed inside the community) could easily be adapted to suit 'Chinese' norms. Those who chose not to perform funerals according to the standard procedure were marked as non-Han or, worse, dangerous sectarians.

The Chinese cultural system thus allowed for the free expression of what outsiders might perceive to be chaotic local diversity. The domain of ritual, in particular, gave great scope to regional and sub-ethnic cultural displays. The system was so flexible that those who called themselves Chinese could have their cake and eat it too: they could participate in a unified culture while, at the same time, celebrating their local or regional distinctiveness.

Imperial officials were, of course, intimately involved in the standardization of funerary ritual but it would never have been possible to impose a uniform structure of rites on a society of such vast size and complexity. More subtle means were required. There is good evidence that imperial officials were engaged in the promotion of a standardized set of funeral and mourning customs throughout the empire (see Ebrey 1986, Rawski 1988a); the same is true for marriage rites (Mann n.d., Naquin n.d.). Accepted norms were enshrined in manuals available in even the smallest towns of the realm. Given what we know about the distribution of power in late imperial China it is probable that local elites subscribed to the accepted customs and encouraged a kind of ritual orthopraxy in the communities under their control: they led by example. Unacceptable practices were gradually suppressed or modified to conform to centralized models (Watson 1985; see also Naquin 1988:53-66 on the standardizing role of ritual specialists).

This may have been the mechanism for the superimposition of a standard ritual structure but we know little about the process of acceptance. Is the standardization we now perceive a consequence of government-sponsored social engineering carried out over many centuries or was it the result of voluntary adoption by the general populace? Need we assume that these processes were mutually exclusive?

It is obvious that there must have been strong incentives for people of all classes and regional backgrounds to cooperate in the cultural construction of a standardized set of rites. Much more

work needs to be done before we can answer these questions. What is clear, however, is that the preoccupation with ritual practice - rather than religious beliefs - made it possible for imperial authorities, local elites, and ordinary peasants to agree on the proper form for the conduct of key rituals.

Thus, the process of becoming Chinese did not involve any kind of conversion to a received dogma; it did not require professions of belief in a creed or set of ideas. One became Chinese, in effect, by acting Chinese - by behaving like Chinese. Perhaps the clearest indicator that this cultural transformation had been accomplished was the performance of key rituals in the accepted manner.

One can find the origins of what I take to be the unique (pre-socialist) Chinese approach to the construction of cultural identity as far back as the Confucian *Analects*, and perhaps earlier (see e.g. Chang 1983:101, 108; Keightley 1987:166). By many interpretations the central theme of Confucianism is harmony in thought and action; correct ideas follow from proper behavior (cf. Fingarette 1972). In this sense orthopraxy is primary to, and takes precedence over, orthodoxy. At the core of Confucian notions of order is the principle of *li*, defined by Benjamin Schwartz as 'all those "objective" prescriptions of behavior, whether involving rite, ceremony, manners, or general deportment' (1985:67). The Confucian approach to *li* is relevant to cultural construction: following correct form ensured that one was playing the game of culture by civilized rules and, in so doing, one reaffirmed one's 'Chineseness'.

I do not wish to be misinterpreted: I am not saying that ordinary villagers were social automatons, rotely performing rituals over which they had no control and little understanding. Nor should they be seen as puppets dancing on strings of convention held by agents of the state. Stressing orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy had profound consequences for all social classes. It allowed China to attain a level of cultural integration that was never possible in other, large-scale agrarian societies. It was a brilliant achievement in the annals of world history. The processes of cultural construction outlined in this talk involved the active participation of all Chinese - not just scholar-bureaucrats but farmers, artisans, merchants, and workers. There is evidence, for instance, that imperial officials were forced to accept, adapt, and coopt ritual practices that first emerged among the peasantry (see e.g. Ebrey 1986:20-9). The standard Chinese funeral that one can still see in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and in rural areas of the PRC appears to be timeless but it is, in fact, an amalgamation of ancient and modern rites (Rawski 1988a). Ordinary people, such as the ancestors of my village friends who live in the New Territories, had as much to do with creating and promoting this amalgamation as anyone else in the realm, including the emperor

himself.

Ritual Form and Cultural Identity in Socialist China

As those who have followed developments in post-1949 China well know, traditional rituals of the sort I have just described were rigorously attacked by communist party officials during the late 1950s and the late 1960s (see e.g. MacInnis 1972:333-4, Parish and Whyte 1968:264-5). Funeral and burial rites were obvious targets of social engineering, especially in south China where activists objected to the 'feudal' implications of the ancestor worship cult.

Besides attacking the foundation of traditional mortuary rites, communist authorities attempted to introduce a new set of socialist rituals, based roughly on Soviet models (Binns 1980:180, Lane 1981). Although field research on this problem has yet to be done it would appear that these new rites have had most influence in the larger cities, among the professional classes. Frugal memorial services replace banquets and ostentatious mourning displays; eulogies extolling the deceased's contribution to the building of socialism are substituted for traditional religious observances.

In the countryside, by contrast, there is considerable evidence[6] that non-socialist funerals are still common and that, since approximately 1980, rural peoples have begun to invest heavily in mortuary rituals of all kinds. Martin Whyte (1988) has argued that there is a growing cultural gap between urban and rural lifestyles in post-Mao China, reflected most clearly in life crisis rituals. Whyte's research focused on funeral rites but his analysis could be applied equally well to wedding ritual (see e.g. Whyte 1977, 1979). He notes that urbanites, due partly to the exigencies of city living, have embraced state-sponsored models for funerals and burials. Rural peoples, by contrast, have been less willing to adopt socialist rites, especially those involving cremation and 'thrifty' mourning customs (Whyte 1988).

Does the fact that China no longer has an agreed upon set of rites (to mark birth, marriage, elderhood, death, and ancestorhood) mean that it no longer has a unified culture? In the past, as I have argued, one of the central experiences of life that helped hold China together was the fact that people of all social stations - rich and poor, rural and urban, official and commoner - performed life crisis rituals according to the same basic form. The disappearance of a unified cultural tradition is something that concerns many Chinese, particularly of the older generation. The physical destruction of the 'four olds'[7] during the Cultural Revolution is paralleled by an

erosion in knowledge about the past.

The Construction of New Cultural Identities in China

The bifurcation of culture into rural and urban forms may be part of a general trend toward the renegotiation of 'Chineseness' among
people in the PRC. One wonders whether a new notion of collective identity, based on a new set of standardized rites and unifying symbols, will emerge from the old?

It is possible to interpret the Cultural Revolution as a state-sponsored movement in that direction, shifting from an emphasis on outward behavior and practice to a central concern with inner beliefs and purity of thought. The political campaigns of that era were designed to break the traditional mold, in a shift from form to content. 'Redness', judged by inner conviction, was stressed above all else; Red Guards and other activists did not allow people to fall back on ritual form or standardized behavior. This new, revolutionary approach required public confession, conversion, and whole-hearted acceptance of Maoist doctrine.

No one, in effect, knew how to act during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Behavioral conventions and norms of public etiquette were not only challenged, those who adhered to the 'old' forms were deemed to be ideologically deficient.

The results of the Maoist preoccupation with orthodoxy are by now universally recognized: disruption, disintegration, and anomie on a massive scale. It would appear that the construction of a new cultural identity through the imposition of a centrally-controlled ideology was an unmitigated disaster for China. This, at least, is one way to read recent history.

What dare one say about the post-Mao reform era? It would be a gross simplification of recent political developments to argue that the reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s constitute a total repudiation of Maoist doctrine, returning the society to a system based on performance rather than ideology. Admittedly, some of the public rhetoric emanating from Beijing does seem to echo such concerns. Deng Xiaoping himself set the tone of the reform era with his famous axiom: 'It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice'.

Rural people interpreted this and other pronouncements as a sign that the ideological heat was off and that performance (read production) would henceforth be rewarded, irrespective of class

background or inner conviction. The much heralded campaign to 'Let a Few Lead the Many to Wealth' was also aimed primarily at rural peoples. In fact, it is safe to say that the post-Mao reforms have had the most *economic* impact in the countryside and that urbanites - save for a relatively small number of entrepreneurs and independent contractors - have been reduced to the role of disgruntled spectators. The resentment felt toward *nouveau riche* farmers has become a serious social problem in some regions, with urbanites freely commenting on the unfairness of economic policies.

Meanwhile the cultural gap between rural and urban may be growing wider each year. To be 'Chinese' no longer implies that one shares
the same sense of cultural identity. The key symbols that helped hold China together (shared rites, folkloric traditions, a common notion of proper lifestyle) no longer have the same meaning that they once did.

The fact that university students used what are essentially foreign (or international) symbols in their Tiananmen Square demonstrations (i.e. hunger strikes, slogan-bearing headbands, V for victory signs, a version of the Statue of Liberty) is revealing and significant. These internationalist forms of political expression have been incorporated into the urbanite culture that is emerging in China's central cities. Thus, in terms of the symbolic reconstruction of a new sense of cultural identity, the activists in the square and their supporters probably have more in common with their Chinese compatriots in Hong Kong, Taipei, and New York than they do with their remote kin in the rural districts of Anhwei and Guangdong. We have little idea, at this writing, how the new symbols of democracy have been interpreted in the countryside or in provincial towns. It does seem likely, however, that the 1989 spring movement to match economic reforms with political reforms is destined to have more influence on the creators of China's emerging urban subculture. What this means for the future of 'Chineseness' as a general construct remains to be seen.

I would like to add a postscript on recent political developments: this talk began with the TV images of the Tiananmen demonstrations. The June massacre brought another set of political dramas to the world's media: the roundup of 'counterrevolutionaries', a sister turning in her 'renegade' brother, memorial services for 'martyred' soldiers killed by dangerous 'thugs'. We are presented with one of the century's most blatant (and transparent) efforts by party officials to rewrite recent history.

The crackdown appears (at this writing) to be concentrated in China's major urban centers. The

sense of despair that characterizes Chinese intellectual life can only get worse in the immediate future. (On this problem see Perry Link's interesting article, in the *New York Review of Books,* vol. 36, no. 11, 29 June 1989, pp. 38-41, written just prior to the military intervention.)

Inevitably the massacre will have a profound effect on the current generation of educated youths and their attempts to reconstruct an acceptable notion of Chinese cultural identity. By mid-June 1989, PRC students and visiting scholars of my acquaintance are asking themselves some deeply troubling questions: 'What kind of people are ruling our country?' 'How could this happen in the 1980s, with the whole world watching?' One 21 year old student from Beijing told me during the week following the massacre: 'My friends and I have talked all night. We have concluded that this is not just a problem of one man or one party. The blame is more general. We think there is something fundamentally wrong with our society. Everything has to be changed, especially the mentality of the Chinese people. This will take at least 50 years, maybe 100 years.'

The echo of voices from the May 4th era are all too obvious. Until the very day of the massacre many Chinese intellectuals were engaged in a movement to reexamine the foundations of Chinese cultural identity. The television epic, *He Shang* (River Elegy, lit. 'early death on the river'), is perhaps the best known product of this movement. It was shown on Chinese Central Television in June, 1988, and sparked a major controversy. The series builds on the Yellow River as a symbol of Chinese culture and history; the yellow waters are tyrannical and unpredictable, both life-giving and life-destroying. The river never changes and yet is always changing. To many Chinese the message of the film was clear: only by rejecting the past and rebuilding a new political culture can China hope to enter the modern world.

It is significant that the principal writer of *He Shang*, Su Xiaokang, was included on the 23 June 1989 list of seven top intellectuals wanted by the state for 'counter-revolutionary crimes'. The authorities were sending a clear message by this act: henceforth, the Communist Party intends to control the redefinition of Chinese cultural identity. This is too important a matter to be left to 'unreliable' intellectuals and ordinary people.

So what is the party propaganda machine promoting? Lei Feng, yet again! The utter futility of this approach defies description. The future of 'Chineseness' in the twenty-first century most certainly does not lie with Lei Feng, or any of the other socialist models on display in the Chinese media. The current ice age in Chinese intellectual and cultural life is not likely to last long. Soon China will experience a burst of creativity and optimism, followed (one hopes) by a renewed tone of confidence and a rejuvenated sense of cultural identity that has meaning in the

modern world.

Thank you.

Notes

*. This lecture draws on material first presented in a conference paper and published in *Perspectives on Modern China: Four Anniversaries*, edited by Kenneth Lieberthal *et al.*, M. E. Sharpe, 1991. The paper is reprinted in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*, edited by J. N. Wasserstrom and B. J. Perry, Westview Press, 1991.

1. K. C. Chang and Hao Chang discussed the historical background of Chinese fasting with me and provided the above information.

2. The construction of culture approach is, by now, one of the dominant themes in American anthropology; it draws on the work of Clifford Geertz (1980), Marshall Sahlins (1976), David Schneider (1980), and a host of others who emphasize the creative rather than the passive aspects of culture.

3. DeFrancis (1984:201) has debunked this argument and attacks the whole notion that Chinese script is ideographic and non-phonetic. His approach, however, is not generally accepted.

4. In recent decades central authorities have discouraged the use of terms such as barbarian (*fan*) and uncivilized (*meiwenhuade, wei kaihuade, yehmande*) when speaking of non-Han. Nonetheless one still hears these terms in Taiwan and in many parts of the People's Republic.

5. The metaphor of cooking is frequently employed by ordinary Chinese when discussing non-Han communities (see e.g. Nequin and Rawski 1987:127-8). The dichotomy between 'cooked' and 'uncooked' is still common in today's Taiwan and is used to designate the degree to which Taiwan's original inhabitants have been assimilated into Han culture.

6. Based on ethnographic surveys conducted by the author in Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Shandong (1985-91); see also Parish and Whyte (1978:265-6) and Jankowiak (1988). Myron Cohen (personal communication) reports that late imperial style funerals were still performed in rural Hebei during his recent field research (1986-7). David Wu (personal communication) observed a traditional funeral, complete with full mourning garb, in Zhejiang, in summer 1987.

7. Old thought, old customs, old culture, and old morals. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards destroyed many historical monuments, including graves and tombs (see e.g. Chan 1984:118, Gao 1987:218).

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《 中國人的文化身份：毛澤東時期後的變化 》

（ 中文摘要 ）

文化可說是內蘊於家庭體制、宗教信仰、政治態度，以及日常生活內的儀式禮節，也因之而會常常變化。在1949前的中國，我們可以見到高度的文化整合，這種文化整合區分了漢與藩之分別，構成了中國文化之特質。這整合性不是建構於一種預設的宗教信仰或信念，而是建基於一套既定的禮儀。儒家文化重視的「禮」，所強調的是實際的正確行為或禮儀，而不是背後的意識形態。然而這種情況在社會主義中國建立之後已有所改變，在邁向現代化的過程中，共產黨正努力摒棄舊有的傳統，而幾次大型的運動亦是嘗試去建構一種以意識形態為主導的新文化，但後果卻是災難性的。社會主義中國在重建文化的過程中，製造了及強化了城鄉的矛盾。這種二分化的文化認同體現在八九年天安門廣場的事件中。學生們的絕食、民主女神等基本上都不是傳統中國固有的東西。這種由外引進的政治表現與社會主義中國的城市文化結合，而又由知識份子所帶領。對於鄉鎮的工農民來說，卻是頗不以為然的。隨八九民運而來的鎮壓及緝捕也主要在大城市中進行，也可以預示中國的共產黨正醞釀要從城市的知識份子裏重奪對中國文化及身份認同的詮釋權。