

2 Foundations of Chinese identity

Place, past and culture

Marjorie Dryburgh

What does it mean to be 'Chinese' today? Identity provides the frameworks within which individuals locate themselves within a community: as individuals, we see ourselves as members of many overlapping communities – of nation or hometown, of gender and generation, of class or of profession, of recreation or consumption, of social or historical experience – and *personal* identities are therefore made up of changing combinations of these various collective identities. While a community may declare its collective identity to be fixed, essential, and timeless, scholarly understandings of identity have focused on the ways in which identities are socially constructed and subject to repeated negotiation, and on the interplay or tensions between multiple identities – between gender and class, between region, ethnicity and nation, and the variations in any of these adopted by different groups (Calhoun 1994).

Given the dramatic changes that China has undergone, in the past century since the collapse of the imperial order in 1911 and within living memory, we should expect those discussions of identity to be intensive, complex, and shifting, as different understandings of China's past and future, and of 'Chinese traditions' are reinterpreted to meet the needs of China today. We should consider also *whose* rendering of Chinese identity we have before us: we should not assume that the understandings of identity present in state-sponsored, media-borne, public discourse are the same as those revealed in everyday behaviour at local level. Finally, we should be conscious of the images of China that come to us from our own local media or popular histories, or from film and fiction. Representations of China in Europe and north America were until relatively recently dominated by a handful of central images of a China that valued the community over the individual; that was generally internally homogeneous and governed by rigid 'Confucian' principles and a strict social hierarchy headed by scholar officials over farmers, artisans and, finally, merchants; that was resistant to change and distrustful of external influence. Recent scholarship has done much to highlight the complexities behind these quite simple images, and an examination of the building blocks of identity in China – in place, culture and history – reveals significant diversity, in the vitality of regional identities, in reinterpretations and assertive challenges to core values, and in changing understandings of China's past and its meanings.

Geography: placing 'China'

The People's Republic of China today covers a territory that stretches from Korea in the north-east across the southern borders of Siberia to Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Pakistan in the west, and through Tibet to Vietnam and Burma in the south-west. It is important to note first that China in this current form is a relatively recent creation, and second that this territory – covering an area comparable in size to the United States – contains enormous internal variation.

While images of China overseas are often dominated by the rice terraces and karst limestone landscapes of the south, much of what is marked as China's earliest history and most ancient culture unfolded in a handful of provinces in the Yellow River basin, where landscape and climate are very different. Archaeologists have located the capitals of the early dynasties, Shang, Zhou, and Qin, in modern Henan and Shaanxi provinces; the philosophers Confucius and Mencius, who articulated the core values of the imperial era, were both natives of modern Shandong. The expansion of the empire to incorporate all of modern China proper, as well as Manchuria in the north-east, Mongolia, Xinjiang in the north-west, Tibet in the south-west, and Taiwan, entered its final stages only in the eighteenth century. Each expansion drew in variations of land, custom, and language, and accompanying potential challenges to the idea of a unitary China. For centuries, therefore, China has been marked by regional variations rooted in climate and topography and manifested in dialect, the arts, culinary traditions, and commercial development; and regional identity was thus an important complicating factor in the negotiation of all-China identity.

G. William Skinner (1977: 212–16) proposed that China should be understood as a collection of nine 'macro-regions': bounded by geographical features such as mountain ranges, and centred on major river systems, the primary transport and commercial arteries of pre-twentieth century China, these macro-regions developed close internal trading relations and a relatively high degree of social and cultural coherence. Despite the emergence of national markets, first in luxury goods and then in staples such as grain, between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, there was much less contact between macro-regions. These remained distinct in many ways into the twentieth century, and robust local cultures therefore competed for attention and allegiance with awareness of a wider China.¹

Topographical and environmental differences influenced local cultures and societies. For example, as noted earlier, the earliest traces of civilization now identified as Chinese are tied to the relatively cold, arid north China plain, where the climate favoured crops such as wheat, millet, and sorghum but did not make farming particularly fruitful, and therefore did not encourage an early emergence of commerce or of a powerful commercial class that could challenge the state or provide an alternative space in which social interests could be negotiated. By the fourteenth century, however, the economic centre

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of gravity of the empire was shifting southwards to the Lower Yangtze region ('Jiangnan', south of the river), where the wetter, milder climate allowed a more productive agriculture that consequently fuelled rapid growth in commerce. Rising status for traders destabilized traditional social hierarchies, and Jiangnan and its cities – Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing among others – became the heartland of a newly commercialized culture that owed significantly less to formal official or imperial patronage than that of earlier centuries (Chow 2004; Marmé 2005). By the late eighteenth century, with the incorporation of Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan into the empire, China was possibly better understood as a multi-ethnic empire than as a unitary state. Although that empire was at this time ruled by a Manchu 'conquest' dynasty, and although the new territories and their people were understood as exotic and alien, influence in these outlying regions was an assertive statement of imperial power and prestige (Teng 2004).

Different regions of China also varied in their apparent level of interest and engagement with the world beyond China's shifting borders. Early western scholarship suggested that China's relations with its neighbours were governed by a 'tribute system' that interpreted all contact as a form of homage by lesser, 'barbarian' powers to a culturally superior China, and this understanding did much to feed the stereotype of a 'closed' and inward-looking China (Fairbank and Reischauer 1989).² It is arguable of course that the magnitude of the task of governing the empire drew official attention inwards until external forces presented a threat, and that this has skewed the treatment of external contact in official sources. But it is also clear that, where external contact was a matter of routine – for example, in the Southeast Coast and Lingnan regions, and on the inland frontiers of the north and west, there was much more intensive and pragmatic interaction through trade and traffic of persons than the 'tribute system' framework would encourage us to expect. We should not ignore the significant periods of disunion in China's history, between the third and sixth centuries, the early tenth century, and most recently in the 'warlord' era of the 1920s: when the centre declined, the pull of regional loyalties, and the power of regional organization and identification rose correspondingly. Despite these regional shifts and variations, the idea that there was nonetheless 'one China', has remained a powerful one.

Chinese traditions: Confucianism and beyond

Chinese identity is also rooted in shared traditions though, here again, we see shifts in principles and interpretations. For much of the imperial era, social and political beliefs among the elite were most visibly shaped by the ideas of Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE), a philosopher and adviser to rulers, as recorded after his death and elaborated by his followers. But this was by no means the only source of important values, particularly among the common

people; and the meanings of Confucianism even among the ruling elite changed significantly over time.

Why, then, did Confucianism appear so important? Again, the explanation lies partly in the governing classes' control of the written records: the people who had the education to record their understanding of Chinese society and its workings, and the prestige to ensure that efforts were made to preserve those records were educated from childhood in Confucian texts and traditions. A Confucian education was an important marker of social status, and the route towards prestigious government service lay in a Confucianized examination system. Like the Greek or Roman classics or the Christian canon in Europe, the Confucian canon in China did much to shape the mental landscape of the ruling classes. It provided instruction in proper values, stories that demonstrated proper and improper behaviour, and offered an assurance that the rulers of the empire were united by clearly articulated common culture (Elman 2000).³ The durability of Confucianism was enhanced by periodic reinventions, most significantly in the second century BCE, when it was established as a philosophy of government; after the eighth century, when it extended its attention from statecraft to cosmological enquiry to meet the challenges posed by Buddhism; and in the eighteenth century, when a new school of 'evidential research' emerged to question the canon itself and its relevance for China centuries after its production.

The core values associated with Confucianism – an insistence on the importance of the family, of education, of public service – appealed to the relatively powerful, while the inclusion of benevolence among Confucianism's cardinal virtues offered a promise of justice and security that could be used to pacify the weak and disaffected. These values were also broad enough to be adapted and re-imagined as society developed, offering an appearance of continuity even in times of dramatic change. So central has Confucian culture been to understandings of Chinese elite identity that culture and values have been taken at times as more important defining elements of Chineseness than, for example, descent or ethnicity, and this centrality of Confucianism has been invoked to suggest that incomers – even conquest dynasties – might be effectively 'sinicized', or made Chinese, through the adoption of core values and behaviour. Better understandings of Chinese historical concepts of ethnicity (Dikotter 1992), and of the relations between alien rulers and Chinese elites, have challenged this argument (Ho 1998; Rawski 1996), but its durability nonetheless highlights the importance attached to values as a means of binding communities together in China.

Despite its influence in public life, however, Confucianism was by no means the only important source of shared values, and other schools of thought also shaped personal identities and served as a focus for local community activity. Confucian principles and the Confucian pre-occupation with social activism were challenged both by Daoism, an indigenous Chinese school that emerged in the same period as Confucianism, and by Buddhism, which reached China from India in the second century and was well established across the empire

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by the middle ages. Both attracted the philosophical interest of the educated elite, were highly influential in the arts, and became the source of much popular religious practice (Schwartz 1985). At a popular level, therefore, 'Chinese values' were an eclectic mix of principles culled from different and competing traditions that might vary according to locality and social class.

Histories of China

The past matters to Chinese identity. Discussions of the past connect China today with its ancient civilization, and while many aspects of China's history are still understood in stereotypical terms as 'feudal', the material heritage of the imperial era is celebrated; and the past is a source of stock tales and characters, positive and negative, that one could call on to frame later experience. China conventionally claims a 5,000 year history: written histories purportedly record events that date back to around 2600 BCE, and there is a rich archaeological record.⁴ While it is not possible to tie some of the earliest archaeological finds specifically to the written sources, it is nonetheless clear that organized and materially sophisticated societies flourished in central China from a very early period (Liu and Xu 2007). Chinese history was intensively, though selectively, documented by China's governing elites. The earliest systematic history, Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian*, was compiled in the first century BCE, and comprised chronologies of historical events, biographies of emperors, nobles, and other notable individuals, and treatises on topics such as rites, astronomy, river management, and other areas of state interest (Hardy 1999). Later histories of the empire borrowed heavily from this template, and the writing of histories became a core official project, each new dynasty compiling a history of its predecessor while routinely documenting its own activities. The cumulative effect of this activity was to create a body of work that tied the foundation of each dynasty to principles of legitimacy that appeared consistent across recorded history, and that heavily emphasized continuity rather than change.

This image of an 'unchanging China' has had a powerful hold over foreign imaginings of China. While some early visitors, such as Jesuit missionaries, enthusiastically recorded Chinese prowess in technical fields including mathematics and astronomy, later visitors, particularly those thwarted in their dealings with the Chinese state, were far more likely to interpret their own failures as evidence of Chinese intransigence and cultural stasis, and the judgement had profound and long-standing effects on official attitudes to China and academic work alike.⁵

However, that appearance of continuity dissolves if we shift our attention from the empire-wide, official record to the local and personal histories that more recent academic work on China is using so effectively. Regional histories of China offer rich data on the local unfolding of empire-wide developments, and personal writings such as private biographies and epitaphs, family histories and genealogies, letters, poems and essays on diverse subjects

that China's educated elite were expected to produce show us how personal identities were articulated and how some relatively affluent Chinese understood their society and their own place within it.

While official histories might reflect the shift from aristocratic to bureaucratic rule in the middle ages, or the changes in taxation practice that followed the growth of commerce in the early modern era, local and personal histories show far more clearly the deeper impact of those changes. These histories show how the 'gentry' families who supplied the imperial state with its officials built and manipulated social networks to make powerful friends and arrange advantageous marriages. They show how rising volumes of trade created a powerful class of merchants who were able to compete with the gentry through charitable works and displays of wealth and taste (Lufrano 1997; Clunas 1991). They show the powerful economic and social constraints on many Chinese women beside the growing expectation that the daughters of the gentry would themselves be educated (Bernhard 2002; Mann 1997). These histories therefore highlight the negotiations of power, interest, and allegiance that were central to identity construction in late imperial China.

By the eighteenth century, attitudes towards the past itself were the subject of debate in official circles. Ambivalence towards the past became more acute in the nineteenth century, as Chinese faced first economic, then political and military pressure from imperialist powers, primarily Britain and France. Defeated in foreign wars – from the Opium wars of the 1840s, through the first Sino-Japanese War of the 1890s – China was forced to conclude a series of 'unequal treaties' that conceded trading and residence rights, and control over territory and local affairs in treaty ports to foreign powers. These defeats overstretched the material resources of the state, leaving China vulnerable to further external challenges and internal disruption, and eroded the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty and eventually of the imperial order itself. The governments of the new republic had little more success than their predecessors in resisting external pressure, and the first decades of republican rule were marked first by further economic and political losses and then by the traumas of all-out war with Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. This period is now most commonly remembered in China as a century of 'national humiliation' (Cohen 2003), and the insistence that the past was to be remembered above all as a series of mistakes that must not be repeated was a common element in reformist and revolutionary thinking in the twentieth century.

Self, community, and nation in the early twentieth century

The traumatic encounter with foreign imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries forced China to re-evaluate its place in the world. While the revolution of 1911 replaced the dynastic order with a new republic, it did not resolve either the practical problems or the wider anxieties that had emerged in the previous century. Through the 'May Fourth' era of the 1910s and 1920s, this continuing failure fuelled an energetic questioning

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of the core principles that governed Chinese society and its future. Many prominent debates revolved around political philosophies: did anarchism or Marxism offer practical answers to China's problems? Could democracy be made to work in Chinese conditions? At the same time, though, questions of identity ran through the discussions: could 'Chinese traditions' be adapted to the modern world? What would be gained or lost by the adoption of foreign ideas or foreign technologies? How should individual Chinese understand their own place within communities such as family, workplace, or native place? How did these smaller, face-to-face communities relate to China as a whole? What were citizens of the new republic expected to do, or know, or be (Chow 1967)?

This also marked a new interest in nationalism. The foreign powers that had defeated China in the wars of the past decades were understood to be driven and directed by a sense of nation that defined a collective project and set out the responsibilities of individuals to the national community. Reformers, such as Liang Qichao and revolutionaries, such as Sun Yat-sen, argued that one of China's great failings was the absence of any shared sense of national interest, and the obscuring of a sense of national community by loyalties to native place, family and status group, and that this had left China vulnerable in the face of foreign pressure, and allowed its relegation to inferior status in its dealings with foreign powers (Bergere 1998). Discussions of nationalism therefore drew in both outward-facing questions of international status, and inward-facing questions of cohesion and community. While the outward-facing questions have historically attracted more attention, their impact on the ground – like foreign pressure in China – was extremely uneven, and they have rarely formed the basis of a persuasive and durable nationalism. The inward-facing questions, of how the national community was to be understood and taken to heart by its members, have been less visible, but equally intractable.

We see these questions through the writings of Chinese intellectuals, but they touched on problems that other Chinese faced every day. Economic development in the cities and pressure on farmers in the countryside created new opportunities and new insecurities, forced many to seek new sources of income, and encouraged migration to cities. This produced changes that went far beyond intellectual life. By the 1920s, for example, women were far more likely to work outside the home, not only in traditional occupations such as domestic service, but in factories, department stores, offices or schools; and this, as much as the early debates on feminism and the traditional status of Chinese women, presented them with new challenges and new choices (Goodman and Larson 2005).

Both abstract and practical questions were discussed in the expanding Chinese press (Reed 2004). Newspapers had circulated in China in the nineteenth century, and had been influential in supplementing informal, personal communication among officials and the educated classes of current events and the state of the empire. Now, however, the very rapid expansion and diversification of the print media in the 1910s and 1920s changed the whole

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game. Scholars have pointed to the role that the print media have had in shaping nationalism in other societies (Anderson 1983); while the readership for newspapers in China was still limited by low literacy levels and constraints on distribution, many more people now had direct, personal access to a far greater variety of content and opinion on both national and social matters. Highbrow journals such as Chen Duxiu's *New Youth* and the fiction of writers such as Lu Xun have been extensively examined for their discussions on the new literature, science and democracy and high-level reform; but Shanghai's flourishing tabloid press, with its coverage of celebrities, scandals, and social anxieties, attracted a wider audience, who had not only some appetite for sensationalism but possibly also first-hand experience of the economic uncertainties, the pressures on working women, and the compromises and detours required to survive in a new China that underpinned the tabloid dramas (Goodman 2005).

New revolutionary communities after 1949

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was hailed as the creation of a 'new China', as the point at which the Chinese people had 'stood up' after centuries of oppression by landlords, bureaucrats and foreign invaders. New China required that a new Chinese people come forward as citizens of the new order; while much of the rhetoric of the early People's Republic focused on building socialism, nation-building, and identity formation, assertively championed by the CCP and state, were also important parts of the project.

Many key reforms of the 1950s and 1960s therefore served both practical and nation-building ends. Land Reform was presented as a step towards securing the welfare of China's farmers, and making agriculture more productive in order to feed a new population of industrial workers. At the same time, it overturned traditional rural socio-economic hierarchies, and gave every family a class label – poor, middle, rich peasant, or landlord – that defined their place in the new order. The expansion of primary education was designed to eradicate illiteracy and build the basic skills needed for national economic development and modernization; it also instilled revolutionary and national values, as a counter-weight to local and traditional cultures. The policies of the Great Leap Forward were championed as a means to catapult China into international economic pre-eminence, but their application also became a test of loyalty and dedication.

These efforts to transform the present and future were accompanied by a radical reinterpretation of China's past, and the reshaping of understandings of national histories was central to the CCP's training of its own members, to its rehabilitation of outsiders, and to its socialization of the citizens of new China. Workplace and community meetings, the media, and art forms such as cinema drew mass audiences into emotional engagement with stories of China's recent history and people were encouraged to consider

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their experiences and past actions within that national context (Apter and Saich 1994). The revolutionary epic *The East is Red* (1965) echoes these strategies. This 'play-within-a-film' charted the humiliations suffered by China at the hands of foreign imperialists and traditional Chinese elites, and the rise of the Communist Party as China's saviour, connecting that national journey from oppression to liberation with common experience. An opening framing sequence tracks across central Beijing and follows an audience into the auditorium where the drama is ostensibly staged: wherever, and in whatever company, we see the film, we begin watching over the shoulders of another audience in which families, the elderly, blue- and white-collar workers, and members of China's minority nationalities, were all represented.

Broadcasting and the print media – now owned by the state – were also important in instilling a sense of the nature and mission of the national community (Chapter 12). The competing voices of the pre-war media had gone, and were replaced by a striking uniformity in tone and content. Consumption of the media message was also a communal activity, and many would read a newspaper publicly displayed on a glass-fronted notice board rather than buying a personal copy, or hear the radio broadcast over loudspeakers in a workplace canteen. The mass media thus became a central element in the CCP's thought work, constructing the 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983) of socialist China, and displaying and embedding it in the everyday lives of the people. While newspapers typically emphasized explanation and directive, other forms such as *reportage*⁶ offered vivid and emotionally engaging stories of revolutionary lives and models (Laughlin 2002).

The drive to reshape identity pervaded visual as well as written media. Images of the new China were ever present in propaganda posters displayed in homes and workplaces, rallying support and raising awareness of specific campaigns, and setting out the benefits of belonging to the new national community. While it is easy to read these as instructions as to what the people of new China must do, they also suggested who they might be, displaying models of the new citizen at work, study, and (occasionally) at leisure, showing newly-liberated women as workers at the forefront of China's industrial modernization, farmers as teachers of urban youth, and the young as both heirs and pioneers of the revolution (IISH and Landsberger, n.d.). The meanings of these nameless models were explored in greater depth through revolutionary martyrs and exemplars whose life stories became patterns for the new ideal Chinese. The most famous of these was Lei Feng (雷锋, 1940–62), the orphaned son of a poor family who lived only to serve the revolution and his army comrades through modest acts of selflessness and first came to prominence only in 1963 after an untimely, accidental death. Other models too, such as peasant organizer Fang Zhimin (方志敏, 1899–1935) and cadre Jiao Yulu (焦裕禄, 1922–64) formed part of a cult of 'red martyrdom' that was reflected in public monuments and commemorations (Hung 2008) as well as in exhortations to learn from Lei Feng and others.

This intensive, top-down work of moulding new identities left little visible space for negotiation, leading us to question how fully this identity discourse was accepted by most Chinese: how many recognized enough of their own lives and experiences in revolutionary propaganda to accept the models of identity that accompanied it; how many presented an appearance of compliance in pursuit of a quiet life. Here again, new scholarship is beginning to tease out some of the personal and local experiences behind the official stories, suggesting that official identity discourse was adapted and complicated by place, gender, and status (Lee and Yang 2007).

Modernization, globalization and the re-imagining of China

As we examine China today, we find the forces shaping identity shifting ever more rapidly. Attitudes to the past, to traditional culture, and to the regions within all China are changing; dramatic economic development is allowing the more fortunate to define themselves in terms of their new choices in work and leisure, while at the same time creating a growing gap between rich and poor, urban and rural. The work of community-building, both in the immediate communities of place and profession (Chapter 6), and in virtual communities online, is becoming more complex. The voice of the state, which was at one time almost the only voice audible in discussions over the nature and future of 'China', is now only one of a babble of competing voices; at the same time, the authorities as aspiring identity-builders are becoming more sophisticated, and more instrumental, in their presentations of China as they understand it to a range of audiences.

Efforts to create reformed citizens for a reforming China continue, both in official discourses of 'civility' (*wenming*) and 'quality' (*suzhi*) in public communication, and in the search for new models of identity. While the cult of Lei Feng was briefly revived in the 1990s, the focus has shifted somewhat to emphasize different qualities and achievements. Thus, on the one hand, shifts in official media content, notably in the rising use of human interest stories to illuminate social issues, allow community and model qualities to be identified without the creation of icons on the scale of Lei Feng; on the other hand, the public appetite for contemporary biography (Chua 2009), celebrity lives and fictional treatments of real-life dilemmas has engaged commercial interests in the negotiation of identity; and rising access to the Internet, blogs and microblogs is creating new spaces for self-representation and community-building. In that context of pluralism and contention, the building blocks of identity in place, culture, and history are being reshaped to meet new needs.

The meanings of place in China have shifted dramatically with rapid, but uneven, economic development, and with rising personal mobility. Major cities such as Shanghai – and to a lesser extent many others on the eastern seaboard

– are bound into global networks of trade and consumerism. They present a self-consciously cosmopolitan face to the world and are developed as magnets for financial and human capital and as the motors of China's future. The speed of this development is in stark contrast to conditions in poorer inland regions, despite government efforts to reduce the disparity; this rising inequality has a potentially corrosive effect on national community as it calls into question the extent to which coastal and inland regions can be seen to be partners and beneficiaries in a shared project. While coastal development has been heavily dependent on labour migration and the displacement of growing numbers of Chinese from poorer regions, legal and social discrimination against migrant workers in the cities has underlined the fissures within the China-wide community. Discussions of local cultures by some inland provincial leaderships have aimed to address this problem on two levels, working to enhance provincial economic status by promoting the province as a destination for inward investment, but constructing local cultures as more authentically Chinese than those of coastal provinces, and as untainted by the problems that have come with rapid development (Oakes 2000).

As economic development provides new opportunities – for some, at least – and the state becomes less assertive in promoting explicitly socialist values, social identity is defined increasingly in terms of wealth, occupation, and consumption of goods or services, from restaurants to electronic media. In this context of greater pluralism, traditional cultures, too, are becoming more visible; but the apparently familiar figures of Confucianism and religious Buddhism are made to serve contemporary uses. After a century in disrepute, Confucius is becoming respectable again, and 'Confucian' private schools in Chinese cities are attracting media attention (BBC News 2008), and this may suggest a hankering in some quarters for traditional values; but the figure of Confucius is also deployed in the global branding of China, in the expanding programme of cultural outreach and soft power run through the new network of 'Confucius Institutes'.⁷ Traditional religion, too, is adapting to new social landscapes. In some areas, local temples are as central to the building of identity and community and to practical public works projects as they are to worship; in others, they are tied into transnational networks of patronage and nostalgia (Chau 2006).

Finally, China's recent and distant pasts are still under reinterpretation. Some aspects of the past have become assets to be displayed and commodified, as tourist destinations for domestic and foreign travellers, or as World Heritage sites, such as the tomb of the first emperor near Xi'an, or the imperial Summer Palace in Beijing; and archaeological finds are a prominent topic in the official press (People's Daily 2010), emphasizing that to be Chinese is to inherit one of the world's great cultures. Other histories are more contentious, as even a cursory glance at Chinese cinema demonstrates. Chinese films set in the past – from art-house fare such as *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige 1993), to blockbusters such as *Hero* (Zhang Yimou 2002) are familiar to Western

audiences as exotic, visually sumptuous experiences; but Chinese audiences appear to examine historical content more critically. While *Hero* attracted massive audiences in China, it was criticized for masking the darker aspects of the career of the first emperor Qin Shi Huangdi with a glossy, Hollywood-style wrapper (Wang 2009). Although it is often films that attract official criticism – Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (1993), which covers the Cultural Revolution, and Jiang Wen's bitter war story *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000) – that receive most attention overseas, the case of *Hero* suggests that histories old and new matter to Chinese mass audiences as well. This may be particularly acute when recent history is discussed. Whereas experiences and memories of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath are divided and often contentious, Chinese suffering during the war with Japan (1937–45) is a common point of reference both for survivors of the war and for younger Chinese, and this collective understanding of Chinese victimization can be mobilized in support of anti-Japanese commentary in the press and in public demonstrations. As the war passes from personal, living memory, its place in collective memory and its value in identity-building depend on the retelling of the wartime story in schools, in the media and in public monuments.

The foundations of Chinese identity therefore are not fixed. Place, past and culture offer a range of ideas and precedents that can be adopted and adapted to meet the needs of the time, though understandings of those needs may be the subject of debate or dispute between different groups and the processes of identity formation depend on constant negotiation. While it is still the voice of the relatively powerful that is most audible in these debates and negotiations, we can now hear other voices, and see with far greater clarity than was once the case the work involved in securing a common understanding of the nature of the Chinese community and the bonds that draw it together.

Notes

- 1 Skinner's macro-regions, and the modern provinces to which each roughly corresponds were: Northeast China (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang), North China (Hebei, Shandong, Henan), Northwest China, (Shanxi, Shaanxi, Gansu), Upper Yangtze (Sichuan), Middle Yangtze (Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi), Lower Yangtze (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui), Southeast Coast (Zhejiang, Fujian), Lingnan (Guangdong and Guangxi autonomous region), Yungui (Yunnan and Guizhou); Skinner 1977, 212–16.
- 2 The work of John King Fairbank was tremendously influential in early twentieth-century English-language scholarship on China; for a detailed critical discussion of his legacy, see Cohen 1984.
- 3 Benjamin Elman's homepage at <http://www.princeton.edu/~elman/> gives electronic access to much of his work on Confucianism.
- 4 There are numerous historical surveys of China; the best concise recent work is probably Ropp 2010.
- 5 This is most visible in the mid-twentieth-century scholarship on China – again, see Cohen 1984 for a fuller discussion – but the assumptions underlying the 'unchanging China' construct survived for longer in 'world histories' such as Braudel 1995.

- 6 Laughlin defines *reportage* as 'any deliberately literary non-fiction text that narrates or describes a current event, person or social phenomenon' (2002: 2).
- 7 See the online presence of the Confucius Institutes at <http://about.chinese.cn/en/>.

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