IMAGING CHINA:
REGIONAL DIVISION AND NATIONAL UNITY
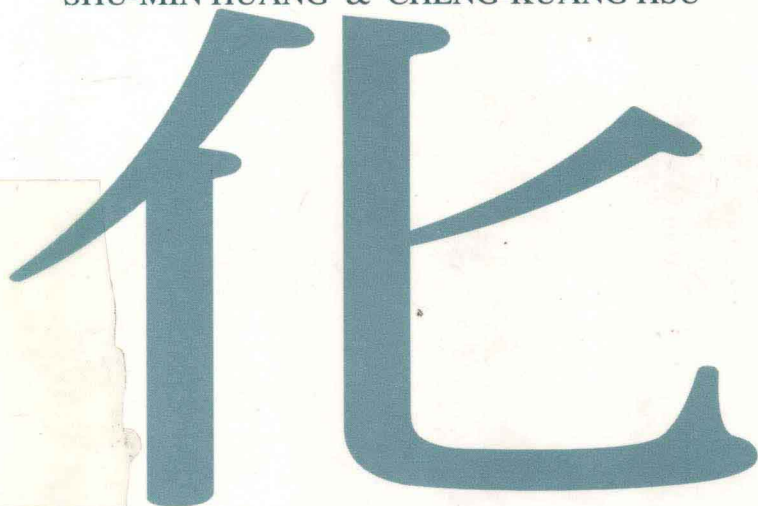
Edited by

SHU-MIN HUANG & CHENG-KUANG HSU

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INSTITUTE OF ETHNOLOGY
ACADEMIA SINICA

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Introduction

Shu-min Huang and Cheng-kuang Hsu

China in the post-Cold War era defies the shared misfortunes of other reforming communist states in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Despite rapid social change and its associated syndromes -- glaring disparities in regional economic growth, the polarization between rich and poor, and the decreased level of state intervention in the affairs of citizens (although the presence of the state is still considerable by Western standards) -- the central state in China either has not faced or has overcome internal challenges (as with Tiananmen) of the sort that have plagued other reforming socialist states: economic disarray, ethnic violence, and political instability. The only certainty is that, should current trends continue, China will duplicate the economic "miracles" of other East Asian countries and early in the next century become an economic power on a par with the United States, Japan, the European Community, and perhaps Russia.

How can we explain China's successful post-Cold War experience in comparative sociological and historical perspectives? To what extent can we attribute its current development to the quality of "Chineseness," something that has already brought success and prosperity to other Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore? In the context of Chinese history and culture, how can we understand contemporary China's tremendous metamorphosis in the face of seemingly self-contradicting and inconsistent policies as manifested in such recent political slogans, as "Socialism with Chinese characteristics," "shared prosperity," "socialist commodity economy," and "constructing socialist spiritual civilization"? We need new imagination to redefine our understanding of the nature of Chinese culture and society. Specifically, we need to

re-examine the nature of traditional Chinese culture and its holding power to mold this vast country together, the evolving meaning of the nation, nation-state, and nationalism as China entered the modern era, the nationalist aspiration among various ethnic or regional entities, the implications of internal diversity and regionalism, and, ultimately, the meaning of "Chineseness" as we enter the 21st century.

The traditional image of China, or Chinese culture, of a unitary state with benevolent gentry-scholars serving as the gatekeepers of a unified Han Chinese culture, has faced increasing challenges in the 1990s. New images have been presented in Western academic circles, and we can differentiate them into several "camps" according to their theoretical or scholarly orientations.

One recent scholarly trend attempts to use concepts and theories developed in European historiography (e.g., linear evolutionism and its heir, modernization theories, Marxism or Neo-Marxism, and post-Modernism) to re-interpret Chinese historical narratives. Its analyses have tried to debase and demystify the traditional model of Confucian universalism and statecraft, so it represents some continuity with Chinese elite intellectual anti-traditionalism that has been a force since the May Fourth era. Australian sinologist W.J.F. Jenner (1992) argues that the longevity of Chinese history has glossed over internal contradictions and inconsistencies and has created the myth of a single people, the Han Chinese, with a homogeneous culture and historical continuity. This self-reifying Chinese culture, as characterized by Confucian orthodoxy as a self-perpetuating bureaucratic despotism resistant to change, has degenerated into a monolith incompatible with the modern world. Following in the same vein, Prasenjit Duara (1993, 1995) and Edward Friedman (1994, 1995) have considered the recent transformation of the Chinese state. They point out that while Confucian statecraft may not have relied on nationalism as its inspiration for common citizenship and national consciousness, it incorporates the modern concept of nationalism, a nineteenth century European product, and its accompanying concepts of national consciousness, statehood, and ethnocentrism (or racism; see Dikotter 1992) at the turn of the twentieth century in China's nation-state building effort. This has engendered the myth of a hegemonic Han

Chinese culture that privileged the centralized state over regional autonomy, and a unified national culture over local diversity. This modern nation-state concept also privileged the Han majority in objectifying national minorities as "Others" (Gladney 1994). The solution to this cultural involution will have to wait for the rise of regional cultures that deconstruct the hegemonic monolith of the tyrannic rulers in Beijing, as Friedman and Jenner argue.

Other scholars, such as Wei-ming Tu (1991, 1993), David Shambaugh (1993), and John Fitzgerald (1992, 1995), stress as the essential ingredient of historical continuity and contemporary development the importance of the traditional Confucian view of China as a state whose self-proclaimed cosmic and moral centrality is necessarily linked to an amorphous definition of the nation (or people, race, or citizens). In their writing they use terms such as "cultural China," "Greater China," and "nationless state" to define the socio-cultural entity called "China," and reject the conflations of culture/polity, nation/people, and state/regime that the previous group attempted to explicate. They argue against the assumption that the eurocentric notions of nation-state or nationalism either represent modernity or inevitably will dominate. Confucian universalism transcends the narrow notions of nation-state and nationalism. The nation-building effort at the turn of the century cannot be interpreted as a rupture of or discontinuity with the past. They are not against Western concepts of "development" or "modernity," since there is no intrinsic incompatibility between China and the West. They argue, however, that Confucian or Neo-Confucian secular humanism necessitates the modification and amelioration of these eurocentric-based concepts by its adaptability and efficacy, as seen in recent economic success among diverse East Asian countries. Thus, the triumph of Chineseness over space and time is attested by the successes of Chinese communities beyond existing political boundaries of the nation-state.

A third perspective takes issue with both of these theories. Anthropologists and social historians such as Myron Cohen (1991, 1994), Hill Gates (1996), David Johnson (1985), Evelyn Rawski (1987), and James Watson (1993) deal with the development and characteristics of pre-modern Han Chinese culture in its increasing unity and homogeneity,

but emphasize the importance of many elements in addition to Confucianism. Rather than seeing only the regional in local culture, this line of scholarship detects within the locally appreciated domains of popular religion and other areas of popular culture (as in novels and opera) strong assertions and identifications with the Chinese state and with (Han) Chinese culture as a whole. Confucianism, from this point of view, was hardly the only unifying element, and the focus on Confucianism may indeed serve to conceal additional, and perhaps more profound, cultural links, such as popular rituals, drama, folklore and literature. For scholars working within this perspective, many modern changes are seen as disrupting the earlier and unifying cultural consensus, such as the emergence of important and pronounced rural-urban cleavages in the context of major social and cultural change in urban areas. Again, the anti-traditionalism that has characterized many modern Chinese intellectuals, as well as the Communist state as a whole, has served to marginalize many cultural elements of what had been the shared tradition. This tradition is now relegated to "superstition" by the Communist state and by many intellectuals, while those still most actively engaged with this tradition have been disparaged by being labeled as "peasants." This larger cultural heritage included an economic culture characterized by a high degree of commoditization and the common use of written contracts in a context where families were distinctly entrepreneurial in organization and orientation (Gates 1996; Hansen 1995), where social mobility was pronounced, and where good management, of people and economic assets, was highly valued. Thus, this tradition could support a modern nationalism at the same time that it served as cultural capital for economic development even though it has been "swept under the rug" by both those who view China as a universalistic Confucian culture and by those who deny or underplay the existence of any major, larger Chinese cultural heritage.

About this Book

In light of such current controversies, we re-examine the evolving nature of the multi-nation state and regional diversities in premodern China, the absorption and incorporation of such divisions by Confucian

statecraft in historical context, and their transformations during the last century when Western conceptions of nation, nation-state, and nationalism, with their explicit racist implications, became the dominant and legitimizing ideology for political mobilization. Furthermore, we want to examine how these regional divisions, or incipient nationalist claims, have grown in modern time as China embarked on various modernization projects and was fractured by political antagonism among competing ideologies. What emerged from this conference are three themes that directly address these questions, and the ten chapters are grouped into these three categories in this volume.

The first theme revolves around the operation and expansion of sinocentric universalism through incorporating peripheral groups and minority tribes adjacent to the Chinese cultural orbit. How does traditional Chinese historiography account for regional divisions that derived from distinct tribal, linguistic, religious, geographic, and biological differences? To what extent is contemporary regional division a result of the incorporation process when the central state extended its territorial control to peripheral areas occupied by different ethnic groups or peoples? What would be the threshold over which non-Han Chinese be recognized as legitimate members of this sinocentric state? How do Confucian scholars reconcile these divisions by employing selective norms or symbols for shared identities? Have there been efforts by Confucian scholars to devise diverse sociopolitical institutions based on such division?

In Part One: The Operation of Cultural Universalism in Historical Context, the chapters provide clues to answering these questions. David Faure's chapter, titled "The Chinese Emperor's Informal Empire: Religion and the Incorporation of the Local Society in the Ming," sets the tone for this volume. He uses local historical data from Guangdong's Pearl River Delta to explain how the incorporation process of this region fits into the Chinese cultural universe and how its unique regional culture has evolved. As the Ming court (A.D. 1368-1644) converted this region into its administration, it unconsciously imposed a set of "metaphors," including formal terminologies used in ancestral rites, Daoist sectarian preferences, and Confucian orthodoxy, onto the regional culture. Faure's lively narratives describe how, as officials from the imperial court

presided over the newly sinicized territory, they busied themselves with tasks of stamping out indigenous deities and rituals for their lack of imperial sanctions. In their place were the selected Daoist rituals of Longhu Shan tradition and ancestral rite, both sanctioned by the court. A comparison between the Pearl River Delta and Putian Region of Fujian Province, an area incorporated into China proper during the Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1126), clearly shows the contrast. In the Putian region we find the distinctive cultural markers of Song strategies for incorporating local communities into the state: imperial recognition of local deities as opposed to the legalization of sacrifice for early ancestors by commoners, with the result that in Putian of stronger ties with the Lushan Daoist tradition (as opposed to the Longhu Shan tradition), and ancestral sacrifice at ancestral halls built near graves. In short, Faure points out that, in order to understand the distinctive nature of China's regional cultures, we should not only look at what has been preserved from the people's unique cultural heritage, we need also to investigate the time frame and its prevailing court culture during which the locality was incorporated into China proper.

The third chapter, "From the Qiang Barbarians to Qiang Nationality: The Making of a New Chinese Boundary" by Wang Ming-ke of the Academia Sinica, can be regarded as the mirror image of Faure's paper, namely seeing the expanding Chinese cultural universe from the other side of the fence. In his path-breaking research on the emergence of the Qiang nationality in history, Wang illustrates the interactions between the dominant Han Chinese and an emerging national group, the Qiang. For the majority Han Chinese people, whose Confucian ideology of cultural universalism maintained a rather amorphous ethnic boundary that paid more heed to inclusive assimilation through cultural acquisition than exclusion based on physical or racial distinctions, the term Qiang was a classification term that broadly referred to all the non-Han Chinese tribes on its western frontiers. The elusive nature of the term thus witnessed the shifting boundary westward from northern Shanxi province of the Shang Dynasty (1765-1122 B.C.) to western Sichuan Province in the early 20th century, resulting from the incremental expansion of the Han Chinese society through successful assimilation of