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**Author:** Shu, Chunyan  
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Chapter 3. The National Character Question in post-Mao Cultural Critique

The reform era has seen a profound socio-political and cultural transformation no less dramatic or problematic than the transition in late Qing. New national consciousness has been informed by the ever fast-changing domestic and international environment, resulting in divergent views of the nation’s place in history and in the world. The question of the national character has been raised in both intellectual discourse and popular culture.

In the first decade of the 21st century, many existing publications dealing with this subject were reprinted in mainland China. Next to the most recent editions of Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*, books originally published in the 1980s to criticize Chinese culture, such as Sun Longji’s *The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture* (1983)\(^ {288} \) and Bo Yang’s *The Ugly Chinaman* (1985)\(^ {289} \), appeared again in the 2000s to join critiques of the national character.

In 2004, *Wolf Totem*\(^ {290} \), a novel with the ambition to carry forward Lu Xun’s national character reform project, became a publishing sensation that “sold in the millions”\(^ {291} \) with its circulation allegedly second only to Mao’s little red book.\(^ {292} \) It once again drew wide attention to the ills of the national character by directing the social-political problems of today towards the nation’s cultural tradition and psychological make-up that had been discussed by Smith, Liang and Lu.

If a century ago, advocates of the national character reforms, despite their widely different political and cultural views, shared the same aspiration of a stronger and better nation against foreign invasion and internal disorder, in 21st century China, when

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289 Bo Yang 柏杨, *Choulou de Zhongguoren* 丑陋的中国人 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2008).
national sovereignty is no longer at stake, and continuous economic growth has boosted the country’s power in the world, why does the national character remain an important discourse in cultural critique? What is the relationship between the contemporary discourse of national character and that of the time of Liang and Lu?

These questions lead to the formation of new self-perceptions and the problem of cultural identity in contemporary China. Self-image and national identity, evolving through dramatic changes and uncertainties both home and abroad, have been stretched between the extremes of either profound pride or utter self-loathing. On the one hand, new anti-foreign rhetoric has emerged in popular discourse, together with the patriotic mobilization of the state, in defending national dignity and wounded pride whenever such dignity and pride have been perceived as under jeopardy; on the other hand, others have argued against what is deemed as irrational and chauvinistic nationalism, and called for a “rational” evaluation of China’s true Self and its place in the world.

When it comes to the realm of culture, the latter tends to call for embracement of universal values embodied in Western cultures and societies, and to criticize the stress of historical and cultural particularity as a form of cultural nationalism (wenhua minzu zhuyi). Such a tendency deserves a closer examination, which this chapter will proceed to offer through the analysis of the national character discourse in the reform era.

Cultural critiques in the 1980s, particularly vibrant in the “culture fever” era, were highlighted by television documentary series River Elegy (1988). It invoked a heated nation-wide debate over the national character, and, as I will argue in this chapter, its impact on the national psyche remains significant till today. The 1990s saw a shift in both intellectual and popular discourse towards a more prudent outlook, with resumed interests and confidence in traditional culture. This shift has coincided with passionate calls for a more assertive voice of China in the 21st century, for example, in the highly nationalistic China Can Say No (1996).

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293 Jing Wang, High Culture Fever.

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has found its theoretical footing in the formulation of a “China model”, arguing along a similar line but with a more nuanced tone and less strident language. These changes notwithstanding, as previously noted, publications such as Wolf Totem are still able to invoke the nation’s century-old quest to solve the national character problem.

Against this background, the discourse of national character has formed an interesting anti-thesis of what has been widely observed as China’s rising nationalism. In the new domestic and international context, critics of the national character often argue for a critical revaluation of Chinese culture for it to return to a sort of normality, that is, a state of being more in accordance with the internationally accepted, universal standards. Hence they are vigilant towards what they see as irrational nationalistic sentiments. Yet, such critiques, often characterized by a strong sense of self-loathing, are just as emotionally charged as the anti-foreign nationalistic yearnings they so strongly argue against.

The recurring theme of self-loathing in the discourse of national character, and its tension with the increasing assertiveness in expressions of Chinese cultural value and pride, both official and popular, have been studied as part of the superiority-inferiority complex. For example, Jing Wang argues that the superiority-inferiority complex is behind the intellectual and cultural scenes of the 1980s and beyond.

As for the inferiority complex, Geremie Barmé observes that, in popular and intellectual circles, many have vigorously denounced China and the Chinese people as being impotent, and they are proud of being “the harshest and most perceptive critics of themselves”. Barmé argues that this self-hate or self-loathing has existed since the mid-19th century; and it has also been seen in continuous efforts from the 1980s on, for instance, in River Elegy, to overcome the negative legacies of both the imperial and


socialist past. And in the 1990s, he contends, this self-loathing has taken a new twist with consumerism playing a redemptive role as the ultimate revolutionary action of remaking oneself.\textsuperscript{299}

From a slightly different perspective, William Callahan points to the relation between self-loathing and the intertwined sentiments of pride and humiliation—what he calls China’s “pessoptimism”—in contemporary self-perceptions. While the feeling of humiliation has a post-colonial, anti-imperial edge against Europe, Japan and the U.S., it can also take an introspective turn and direct criticism towards the Chinese national character for being so weak as to allow such humiliation to take place. Callahan makes an interesting comparison with the mindset in modern Scottish culture as reflected in the literary work \textit{Trainspotting},\textsuperscript{300} in which one character said, “Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonized by wankers…We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth.”\textsuperscript{301} Callahan suggests that it is the same sense of humiliation and despair in the otherwise rather different Chinese and Scottish nationalisms that are behind such fierce self-criticism.

In this light, this chapter will study the resurgence of Chinese critiques of the national character as a manifestation of intellectual concerns with the nation’s present and future—what Gloria Davies calls “the patriotic worrying” (\textit{youhuan}).\textsuperscript{302} It will do so by analyzing two cases of contemporary national character critiques and by placing them in their historical and international contexts.

\section*{3.1. Discourse of National Character in Contemporary Cultural Critique}

The landscape of contemporary Chinese cultural critique appears to be as diverse as that observed of the West. Critical discourse, similar to that of the West, touches upon issues ranging from globalization and modernity to social equality, with viewpoints across the cultural spectrum; whereas traditionally it has been created in cultural

\textsuperscript{299} Barmé, ““To Screw Foreigners Is Patriotic””, pp. 209-234. The part on self-loathing, see “self-hate and self-approbation”, pp. 219-228.
\textsuperscript{300} Irvin Welsh, \textit{Trainspotting} (London: Minerva, 1996).
spheres of publishing, television, and film production, it is now also diverted to the most recently developed and rather active social media platforms. Furthermore, in China, as anywhere else, cultural critique is inseparable from political issues.

However, it has to be pointed out that Chinese cultural critique is particularly subject to political interpretations. Writers have always been socially and politically engaged, literature being endowed with a didactic function, willingly or not, and even the most apolitical genre has its hidden political significance. Therefore, Chinese cultural critique, including the criticism of national character, should be understood within a socio-political context that is significantly different from that of the West.

The most significant difference is the speed and magnitude of changes in almost every sphere of national life. Following the dramatic transformations since the reforms and opening-up, problems of social stratification among urban and rural population, the stark contrast between the rich and the poor, and the nostalgic feeling towards a society largely free from the negative impact of commercialization, have drawn intellectual debates over state power, market regulation, social welfare, equality and justice, the loss of morality, and so on. Such debates have divided socially concerned critical intellectuals into camps with highly reductive labels such as the liberals, the New lefts (xin zuopai), the post-modernist, and the Third Way, although their cultural viewpoints might be very different from those of their counterparts elsewhere.

Another noteworthy feature of Chinese critical discourse lies in its ambiguous boundaries created by the intricate relations between its cultural and political implications. Critical opinions that have been perceived as potentially threatening to the party-state are rarely able to reach the general public through state-controlled media. Other critical inquiries that have found their ways to appear, regardless of their original intentions, are most likely to be incorporated by different factions of the state in the official rhetoric. Therefore, critical discourse as implied in this research, to be more specific, only refers to the texts that are available to the general public in mainland China, and does not include the no less important critiques that have been filtered by self or state imposed censorship, many of which are to be found in unofficial publications or various underground channels.

Within the same context, but on a different note, cultural critiques might be approached

as an alternative and oblique way of expressing concerns over social policies and political status quo in general, for voices of political concern are less likely to be expressed openly and straightforward under media censorship. Therefore, whereas this chapter only analyze cultural critiques that point directly to Chinese culture, especially cultural tradition and Confucianism, it does not suggest that their political implications should be overlooked.

Bearing in mind the intimate relationship between culture and politics, cultural critics analyzed in this study—whose criticism of traditional culture and the national character is tolerated by the state—might have chosen to invest their political quest of various convictions in often deliberately radical cultural statements to convey their messages to well-informed readers. In their efforts to steer the nation’s modernization process to the direction they deem as proper, many of them are prepared to place national culture in an inferior position as compared to those in the West, even at the risk of being identified by their opponents as xenophiles.

To put it shortly, although cultural critiques in post-Mao China seem to be, like cultural critiques elsewhere, varied and autonomous reflections towards socio-political problems captured by self-reflective intellectuals, their relations with the socio-political status quo are not merely the ones between the inspired and the inspiration. Critical discourse that has emerged in the realm of culture should be studied simultaneously as a discourse filtered by state censorship and as an alternative to politically critical inquiries.

These confinements notwithstanding, contemporary cultural critiques are significant to the study of self-perceptions and cultural identity. In fact, the intimate relations between cultural critiques and their political aspirations make it even more interesting to ask the question as to how the troubled self-images came into being, and how the pursuit of a Chinese modernity or a better national future has caught, and will continue to catch, the cultural imaginations of many critical minds.

1) When the Sheep Meets the Wolf: the National Character Question in *Wolf Totem*

*Wolf Totem* was introduced in 2004 as a criticism of the weak national character that “originated from the agricultural civilization” and “has become a heavy shackle to
China’s social transition.” Its author, with the pseudonym Jiang Rong (b. 1946), is a retired political scientist formerly attached to Beijing University. Jiang spent ten years in the remote grasslands of inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution before he returned to Beijing to study at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The quasi-autobiographical novel touches upon many important issues in the modernization process, such as environmental deterioration and ethnic conflicts. But the national character is undoubtedly the central theme, gradually unfolding in the stories of life struggles of the nomadic tribe, wolves, and nature, as witnessed by the protagonist Chen Zhen.

As the author argues through Chen, the “competition of world civilizations” is fundamentally a competition of the national character. In Chen’s interpretation, Chinese national character is responsible for the country’s tragedies in its encounters with foreign nations:

Over the past hundred years, domesticated Chinese have been bullied by the brutish West. It's not surprising that for thousands of years the Chinese colossus has been spectacularly pummeled by tiny nomadic peoples...Temperament not only determines the fate of a man but also determines the fate of an entire race. Farming people are domesticated, and faintheartedness has sealed their fate.

This weak agrarian character, depicted as cowardly and vulnerable as that of domesticated animals, is believed to be the most fatal defect of the Chinese nation as well as the root of China’s ills. In one of the scenes of nomadic life struggles Chen Zhen witnessed, he found a shocking similarity between the behavior of sheep and that of the Chinese people as described by Lu Xun:

When the wolf knocked the unfortunate sheep to the ground, the other sheep scattered in fright. But the entire flock soon calmed down, and there were even a few animals that timidly drew closer to watch the

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304 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, preface. References in this study are made to the 2008 English version of Wolf Totem, but as it omitted some parts of the 2004 Chinese publication, certain sections from the 2004 Chinese version are also quoted and translated by this author whenever necessary.

305 Howard Goldblatt, “Translator’s Note,” in Jiang, Wolf Totem, p. VII.

306 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 396.


308 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, pp. 364 & 375.
wolf eat a member of their flock... They pushed and shoved and craned their necks to get a better look. Their expressions seemed to say, “Well, the wolf is eating you and not me!” Either that or, “You’re dying so I can live.” Their fear was measured by a sense of gloating. None made a move to stop the wolf.

Startled by the scene, Chen was reminded of the writer Lu Xun, who had written about a crowd of dull-witted Chinese looking on as a Japanese swordman was about to lop off the head of a Chinese prisoner. What was the difference between that and this? No wonder the nomads see the Han Chinese as sheep. A wolf eating a sheep may be abhorrent, but far more loathsome were cowardly people who acted like sheep.

While the Chinese nation has developed over the centuries into a non-barbaric agrarian civilization—the nation of “civilized sheep”, as Chen Zhen claims, Western civilizations, having evolved in a half-barbaric fashion, have inherited many characteristics from ancient nomadic people and become nations of “civilized wolf”.

For the most part, Westerners are descendents of barbarian, nomadic tribes such as the Teutons and the Anglo-Saxons. They burst out of the primeval forest like wild animals...which is how they’ve retained more primitive wildness than the traditional farming races.

The most advanced people today are descendents of nomadic races...not only did they inherit their courage, their militancy, their tenacity, and their need to forge ahead from their nomadic forebears, but they continue to improve on those characteristics....In the West, primitive nomadic life was their childhood, and if we look at primitive nomads now, we are given access to Westerners at three and at seven, their childhood, and if we take this further, we get a clear understanding of why they occupy a high position.

Jiang’s novel interprets the character of the “civilized wolf” as intimately connected to

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the higher position of the West and its more advanced civilization characterized by values of liberty, democracy and equality. Based on such an assumption, Jiang then turns to the inspiration of his thesis—the virile spirit that runs through nomadic blood and manifests itself in the nomadic character. As the book continues to argue, the nomadic spirit, with the wolf totem as its essence, is not confined to the grassland, for it can also be applied to explore the ocean and the space. And it has not only influenced nomadic people, but also influenced the world. In particular, Jiang’s book portrays the nomadic spirit as “the secret of Western rise”:

But we’re lucky, we’ve been given the opportunity to witness the last stages of nomadic existence on the Mongolian grassland, and, who knows, we might even discover the secret that has led to the rise in prominence of Western races.

If the nomadic spirit has created the “civilized wolf” and become the secret of the Western rise, in comparison, in the case of China, it is Confucianism with “autocratic repression” that has resulted in the loathsome, cowardly people of “civilized sheep” as well as the most loathsome aspect of the national character—servility:

Our Confucian guiding principle is emperor to minister, father to son, a top-down philosophy, stressing seniority, unconditional obedience, eradicating competition through autocratic power; all in the name of preserving imperial authority and peaceful agriculture. In both an existential and an awareness sense, China’s small scale peasant economy and Confucian culture have weakened the people’s nature, and even though the Chinese created a brilliant ancient civilization, it came about at the cost of the race’s character and has led to the sacrifice of our ability to develop. When world history moved beyond the rudimentary stage of agrarian civilization, China was fated to fall behind.

Yet, despite its weakness and ills, the nation has survived thousands of years. To

313 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 197.
314 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 364.
315 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 377.
316 Jiang, Wolf Totem, p. 304.
317 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 110.
318 Jiang, Wolf Totem, p. 304.
explain such endurance, and to justify his national character remaking project, Jiang Rong finally takes the daring step of reframing the nomadic spirit as part of China’s historical legacy.  

As the protagonist Chen Zhen argued, it is exactly the nomadic invasion of central China, and the consequent transfusion of nomadic blood and character into the weak agrarian nation, that has assisted China to escape its doomed fate of extinction.

Chen Zhen claims that Chinese civilization has been developed through the unique combination of “most aggressive and strong grassland” and “the biggest rural area of weak agrarian culture”. In fact, the original Chinese version of *Wolf Totem* includes a whole section of “theoretical exploration”, in which Chen Zhen presents his narrative of Chinese history by identifying the several periods of the transfusion of nomadic blood into Han people, which Chen sees as the most glorious times of Chinese history. While Confucian thought has obliterated the contribution of nomadic spirit and culture, as Jiang Rong goes on to contend through Chen Zhen, it is now time to finally face the roots of the nation’s problems, to end the century-old debate on national character, and once again to inject the progressive spirit of the wolf:

> Learning their progressive skills isn’t hard. China launched its own satellite, didn’t it? What’s hard to learn are the militancy and aggressiveness, the courage and willingness to take risks that flow in nomadic veins.

Therefore, only if the spirit of the wolf totem—the “most valuable local spiritual source” in Chinese civilization—is injected, can the nation learn the most important secret of survival and success from the nomadic people and their Western successors. As such, the “civilized sheep” will finally turn into “civilized wolf”, and “the sleeping lion of the East” and “the dragon” will be truly revitalized.

Narrating through the intriguing and exotic experiences of the nomadic life so intimately related to wolves, Jiang Rong does not conceal his ambition of transforming

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the Chinese national character for the eventual revitalization of the civilization. In a rather simplistic and polemic fashion, his thesis employs the cultural symbols old and new—the dragon, the sleeping lion, the wolf and the sheep—to lament the nation’s past defeats and to search for a more desired national future.

The national past and present in Jiang’s thesis is viewed in a rather negative and even desperate light in the irreversible process of modernization. The image of the Chinese people as conveyed through Chen Zhen’s reflection is one of a weak, secular, and ignorant nation. In comparison, the nomadic spirit of Inner Mongolian tribes, and the aggressive and strong West that inherited such a spirit, are subjects of admiration and inspiration.

The sense of self-loathing is particularly strong in Jiang’s condemnation of the weak national character, for to him, “a wolf eating a sheep may be abhorrent, but far more loathsome were cowardly people who acted like sheep.” Yet this self-loathing is also entangled with a sense of pride, as later Jiang framed the invaluable spirit of wolf totem as part of the nation’s “great and rich” spiritual legacy. In such a way, once the national character reform is accomplished, in Jiang’s imagination, the sheep will turn into the lion and the dragon, marking the grand revival of Chinese civilization.

Such an entanglement of pride and loathing is accompanied by a self-imposed sense of urgency and anxiety to solve the country’s problems—to work on national imperfection towards national perfection. It is this drive of “the patriotic worrying” that propells Jiang Rong to identify shortcomings and offer solutions. And opposite to it, the sentiments towards the perceived stronger West are equally ambivalent: the West as the nation’s Other is to be learned from, and at the same time, to be resisted and overcome.

2) Wang Xiaofeng’s Problem with Chinese Characteristics

The question of national character as raised in Wolf Totem has touched almost every sphere of cultural critique. Criticism of social and cultural problems often lead to fierce accusations of the low “quality” (suzhi) of Chinese people, which is a phenomenon

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326 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 319.
327 Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 377.
328 Davies, Worrying About China, pp. 18-31.
329 For research on the discourse of “quality” see, for example, Ann Anagnost, “The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi),” Public Culture, Volume 16, Number 2 (2004), pp. 189-208.
especially to be observed in the country’s increasingly active online space. In addition to netizens from all walks of life, cultural critics associated with traditional media or academic institutions also voice their critiques of the national character in new ways such as blogs and microblogs. One case in point is the popular blog of a Beijing-based journalist Wang Xiaofeng (b. 1967).

As the chief cultural editor and writer of the periodical *Sanlian Life Weekly*, Wang vigorously criticizes Chinese culture through his journal articles, books, and personal blog. His critiques, especially on his blog [www.wangxiaofeng.net](http://www.wangxiaofeng.net), being widely noted by domestic and international media, have made him one of the most important opinion makers of Chinese online space. And his prominence in the online writings has been aided by his writing style with “zest and flavor” in his critical inquiry.

Wang’s cultural critique begins with his criticism of the popular music industry. He points out the lack of creativity in Chinese popular music, and holds responsible almost all parts of the industry: severe ideological control over cultural products, the malfunctioning commercial sector, the ignorance of intellectual property rights by consumers and the general public, and the low morale accompanying the pursuit of fame and wealth. The problem in the music industry is not a single issue that stands out in China’s cultural realm, argues Wang, a similar case can be made for the movie industry, sports, publishing, as well as internet development.

The lack of creativity and originality in contemporary Chinese culture, according to Wang, is closely linked to the political culture of “rule of the ruling elite” as compared to the Western style “rule of law”. Such a culture, after being institutionalized, has led to a closed circle of cultural production. As Wang describes, on the one hand, the ruling elite endeavors to build a so-called harmonious society by means of “ideological repression”, creating “devastating conflict” in Chinese thinking; on the other hand,

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330 See, for example, [http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570727,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570727,00.html)


333 Interview with Wang Xiaofeng in February, 2011.
“the ruled”, instead of relying on “a scientific and rational social regulating system”, tend to “expect a wise ruler” to resolve cultural and social conflicts.\(^{334}\) It is such a lack of subjectivity in Chinese consciousness that undermines the application of the rule of law. Wang calls such a lack of subjectivity “the servile nature of the people”, and believes that it is a weak national character in itself, as well as the origin of many other ills in contemporary Chinese society.

Wang further argues that “the servile nature”, deeply rooted in Chinese national character, can be traced back to Song and Ming Dynasty:

\[This \text{ is manifested in } \text{[the novel]} \text{ Three Kingdoms, the essence of dross (zaopo) in Chinese tradition } [...] \text{. Once there’s no interests in such a story, in such a mindset, then the national character is really changed } [...] \text{. Many ills cannot be treated because Chinese thought from the Ming Dynasty is still very much present in contemporary China } [...] .\]\(^{335}\)

He attributes that durability of the servile nature to the inertia of the cultural tradition. Eventually, he looks to Confucianism and its lack of religious spirit as the ultimate cause of Chinese culture’s inferior position in relation to Western cultures:

\[Confucianism \text{ has always been manipulated by the ruling class } [...] \text{ and people are very receptive to such a ruling ideology } [...] \text{. Confucianism differs in nature from religion } [...] \text{ while religion creates a sense of fear (jingwei); (such fear) is lacking in Confucianism. Instead, Confucianism remains functioning at a sheer moral level, and lacks the foundation of spiritual belief}.\]\(^{336}\)

Wang’s criticism of contemporary Chinese culture is based on a comparison with Western culture. He acknowledges the role of Western popular music in his personal development. Born in the late 1960s, he has been drawn towards European and American popular music that began to appear in China during his youth, especially in his college years as a law student. It was during that period that capitalism started to develop, and the state-planned economy gave way to marketization and privatization. The reforms and opening-up, in Wang’s opinion, have been a process in which Chinese people got in touch with “a more advanced culture” in human development, resulting

\(^{334}\) Interview with Wang Xiaofeng.

\(^{335}\) Interview with Wang Xiaofeng.

\(^{336}\) Interview with Wang Xiaofeng.

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in a conflict between two cultures.\textsuperscript{337} As he describes, with the impact of Western culture, “we began to think about what was wrong with our own culture.”\textsuperscript{338}

Nevertheless, after 30 years, Wang is disappointed to see that few Chinese have gained a genuine understanding of “the advanced form of human civilization”—Western civilization. To him, Chinese understandings of capitalism, of the free market, as well as of Western culture, remain “extremely shallow”\textsuperscript{339}.

\textit{The capitalist system that has developed over the last 300 years is well-organized, comprehensive, scientific, and sound, with a strong foundation. [...] Yet everything we have today, we have taken through a tremendous shortcut, directly (importing) the outcome of such a system, while ignoring all the experiences accumulated through their failures along the way [...] We always copy their facade without constructing our own building, and then call it our culture, our entertainment, our art [...].}\textsuperscript{340}

Wang Xiaofeng chooses to analyze the cultural problems and vent his dissatisfaction with the social and cultural status quo through his vigorous criticism of the \textit{suzhi} of the Chinese people. As he puts it, “Chinese thought from the Ming Dynasty is still very much present”. Therefore, he frames Confucian tradition as having nurtured the national character of servility, and its social and cultural mechanisms as having consolidated such a character that it has never been replaced by a sense of subjectivity.

He acknowledges Bo Yang’s influence on his rethinking of tradition and his critique of the weakness and flaws of the national character.\textsuperscript{341} It is with the same spirit of self-criticism that he looks at contemporary cultural phenomena, which explains why he looks back at the 1980s with a sense of nostalgia:

\textit{I think that is the second enlightenment after the May Fourth Movement—the second time when we encountered Western culture... And the most representative case was River Elegy, [which] reflected on the limitations of Chinese civilization from an intellectual...}
What he and many others regard as the second enlightenment, was the time of increasing individual freedom and loosening ideological control. The enlightenment spirit of that time apparently remains a source of inspiration for Wang’s critique. Wang shares with River Elegy an aspiration for individual liberty and equality, and the same resentment of servility as being observed from socio-cultural reality.

At the same time, it is also abundantly clear that Wang couples the values of enlightenment with the superiority of Western culture. For cultural critics like Wang, China will not be able to catch up with the West unless some of the fundamental values of Western modernization, applicable to any modern society in his eyes, are accepted and internalized. Yet, despite numerous efforts of generations, as Wang Xiaofeng regretfully notes, these universal values have not found their way into Chinese minds, which in his rationale is the result of strong resistance from conservative forces.

It has to be noted that his opinions draw support from scholarly calls to pursue Western-style modernization, for instance, from the Guangzhou-based scholar Yuan Weishi (b. 1931), a retired Professor of Philosophy.\(^343\) As a dedicated advocate of liberal values and their application in China, Yuan classifies Chinese traditional culture into institutional culture (zhidu wenhua) and moral values (jiazhi guannian). According to him, traditional Chinese institutional culture severely hinders the process of modernization; many moral values, especially the emphasis on collective interest and family values, have also become the main obstacle to China’s acceptance of universal values and its transition towards a modern society, after being institutionalized into “Confucian hierarchical values” of “the three cardinal guides and five ethical codes” (sangang wuchang).\(^344\)

In comparison, as Yuan argues, modern liberal ideals represent universal values, for they have been developed in societies with academic and ideological freedom.\(^345\) Therefore, the acceptance of such values is the only way to rescue a possible Chinese modernity from the powerful force of conservative culture. That is why he believes the

\(^342\) Interview with Wang Xiaofeng.
\(^343\) Interview with Wang Xiaofeng.
\(^345\) Yuan Weishi 袁伟时, *Jindai Zhongguo lunheng* 近代中国论衡 (Hong Kong: Roundtable enterprise limited, 2006), p. 262.
harsh self-criticism in the discourse of national character, such as the introspection of Bo Yang, is valuable, for “it showed our weakness that we should be courageous to face”.\textsuperscript{346} In fact, Yuan takes a step further to view contemporary critiques of the national character as a continuation of the unfinished projects of Liang Qichao, Lu Xun and Hu Shi, whom he refers to as his liberal spiritual mentor:

\textit{The historical task of reforming the national character and discarding the servile logic, started by the pioneers at the New Culture Movement, has not been accomplished yet.}\textsuperscript{347}

\textit{Liang Qichao and Lu Xun advocated national character reforms [...] To reform national character is no more than to promote changes in thought and culture, to get rid of the deeply rooted servility [...]. Hu Shi also said, to become a modern citizen, one has to salvage oneself...and to walk out of his/her own servility.}\textsuperscript{348}

It is in this vein that Wang Xiaofeng’s problem with Chinese national character is comparable to the cultural critiques of the 1980s, which, as I will analyze later, were also drawn from a firm belief in Western liberal values in the Chinese context. But before that, it is important to note that the popularity of Wang’s cultural critiques,\textsuperscript{349} both online and in print, suggests that he has not only drawn from Chinese liberalism but also captured a sentiment shared by a much bigger audience, just as \textit{Wolf Totem} has struck a chord with its allegedly million of readers.

\textbf{3) Modernity Imagined and Past Revisited}

The two examples of national character criticism—\textit{Wolf Totem} and Wang Xiaofeng’s cultural critiques—reflect the making of a troubled self-image in the pursuit of modernity in 21\textsuperscript{st} century China. They are similar in the sense that they both attribute the nation’s unsatisfactory status quo to Confucianism, therefore representing a tendency of anti-traditionalism. And this tendency is also, in both cases, accompanied by a strong sense of self-loathing mixed with youhuan, despite Wang’s effort to express it with his satire and cynicism.

\textsuperscript{346} Yuan Weishi, \textit{Daguo Zhi Dao}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{347} Yuan Weishi 袁伟时, \textit{Zhongguo xiandai sixiang sanlun} 中国现代思想散论 (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), p. 365.
\textsuperscript{348} Yuan Weishi, \textit{Daguo Zhi Dao}, pp. 6 & 8.
\textsuperscript{349} Hu Han, \textit{Hulianwang xin zhengzhi yu tidaixing minzhu}, pp. 20-21.
They demonstrate that the search of a cultural identity is still caught in a predicament between the past and the West. Economic development has not eliminated the century-old problem of the national character; even worse, in the pursuit of wealth and vanity, the modernization project has been seen as pursued at the cost of ecological balance and the humanistic spirit, causing the ills in the national character to manifest in new ways.

Many of the pitfalls in Chinese national character identified by Jiang Rong and Wang Xiaofeng—the servile nature, the conservatism in traditional culture, and the lack of religious spirit—were the main constituents of the national character discourse a century ago, as we have discussed through the texts of Smith and his contemporaries. And on top of that, Confucianism, seen as representing traditional culture, remains to be associated with conservatism, servility, and the resistance of religious spirit in China.

The problem of Chinese national character, for Arthur Smith, was that its intellectual foundation of Confucianism was so profoundly rooted in the national psyche that it hindered China from being salvaged by Christian Enlightenment, that is to say, in the eyes of a missionary, it hindered the moral improvement of a large part of the human race. For a late Qing reformer such as Liang Qichao, at least during the years of he worked on his “new people” thesis, the essential problematic of Chinese cultural characteristics lay in their incompatibility with the nation’s modernization process—its transformation from an old and weak empire to a young and strong nation.

To contemporary cultural critic Wang Xiaofeng, the national character represents the worst part of Chinese culture—“the essence of dross”—being consolidated in the national psychological make-up. It then becomes the ultimate reason for the problems in the cultural realm as well as other aspects of national life; and it is a severe obstacle for the Chinese people to learn from the most advanced culture in the modern era, therefore an obstacle to China’s cultural modernization.

In such a framework, the past, with the long-lost glory and the “feudalistic” Confucian cultural legacies, shadows over the road to a better nation. As long as Confucian culture remains an important element of the Chinese character, the imagined modernity, inspired by its manifestation in Western societies, is nowhere to be seen in the near future. Wang’s urge to distance himself and to break away from tradition, as we will analyze later, resembles the mindset of many liberal intellectuals in the 1980s.
However, Jiang Rong has chosen to deal with the identity problem with a very different approach. He integrated the aspired wolf spirit into the past as something originally present in Chinese culture yet later being oppressed and lost. Such a reinterpretation of cultural history thus defines the national character reform as a project of rediscovering the hidden essence in Chinese culture, rather than negating cultural tradition as a whole.

In the contemporary discourse of national character, as was the case for Liang Qichao’s “new people” thesis, the concept of “the West” is very much present. Both Jiang and Wang promote values such as individual liberty and equality as the foundations of a better nation, envisioning a future for China in a Western-style modernization.

Wang Xiaofeng rejects to view modern history in the light of either ancient glory or recent humiliation, both prominent in contemporary interpretations of Chinese history, especially modern war history. Instead, he advocates a spirit of rationality as perceived in a universal liberalism (ziyou zhuyi), an approach described by Yuan Weishi as to “internalize rationality and tolerance as part of Chinese national character”. By positioning himself from a universalist perspective, Wang tries to go beyond a superiority-inferiority complex that he perceives as inherited in irrational nationalism.

Whereas Wang believes that Western culture represents the most advanced human civilization in modern times, for Jiang Rong, the meaning of the West and its power is different. They are to learn from, and at the same time to overcome. Thus, the meaning of the national character critique is also different. Jiang’s self-criticism and introspection are colored by a strong sense of humiliation and even despair, which is more in accordance with what Callahan describes in Scottish nationalism. Jiang criticizes the torpidity of the loathsome sheep facing attacks of the wolf, just as the Scots in Trainspotting resent the losers being colonized by wankers. In terms of China-West relations, a Social-Darwinist view is still present in Wolf Totem and its imagination of modernity.

3.2. Historical Legacies of the 1980s and the May Fourth Movement

As I have briefly touched upon, there is an intimate connection between contemporary

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cultural critiques and the cultural fever in the 1980s. Such a connection is also self-evident when it comes to critiques of the national character. Contemporary critics look back at the 1980s for inspiration, and perceive their pursuit of cultural reforms as a continuation of the unfinished projects of Liang Qichao and Lu Xun. Therefore, in order to explore the historical dimensions of the discourse of national character, we should first return to the most recent past and examine the contemporary discourse as a legacy of “the second enlightenment” in the 1980s.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, the country embarked on a modernization process that deviated from the Maoist approach; and along with the reforms and opening-up, came a tide of ideological liberalization (sixiang jiefang). At the beginning of the 1980s, intellectuals had not yet encountered the multifold challenges posed by commercialization and marketization, which were to be a major concern of critical thinking later in the 1990s; instead, they found themselves in the post-Mao cultural realm provided with a historical opportunity to be liberated from the legacies of the Cultural Revolution, and to take the responsibility of reconstructing national culture within the new domestic and international settings.

Although grounded in the socialist system, the intellectuals were aware of the material and social achievements of the capitalist West, and most enchanting to their minds was the intellectual enlightenment of Western thought, particularly scientific rationality, which became the major inspiration of their own ideological liberation.

1) Cultural Fever and the National Character Discourse in the 1980s

It was within such a context that the Series towards the Future (Zouxiang Weilai Congshu) was published between 1984 and 1988, which included 74 volumes of translation work and Chinese research covering subjects ranging from natural and social sciences to humanities. It chief editor, Jin Guantao, had a strong preference for scientific rationality in his interpretation of social development. Drawing methodologies from natural and information sciences, Jin and his co-author, Liu Qingfeng, developed their “ultra-stability hypothesis” by applying theories of systems, control and information to the fields of history and sociology.352

Another influential yet distinctively different series was *Culture: China and the World* (*Wenhua: Zhongguo Yu Shijie*), with an emphasis on introducing Western scholarship to Chinese literary studies and philosophy. Their translations included, for example, Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Many members of the editorial board, such as researchers of Western philosophy Gan Yang and Liu Xiaofeng, literary scholar Qian Liqun and Chen Pingyuan, and philosopher Chen Lai, became leading figures in their respective fields since the 1990s. While their scholarly interests and convictions are rather divergent, the chief editor of the series, Gan Yang, focused on applying Western hermeneutics to interpret social and cultural issues of modern China. Toning down the coherence of tradition in modern times, his use of hermeneutics was more tuned to the critique of traditional culture and the learning of Western culture, for the eventual goal of developing traditional culture through challenging it.

These two series marked the peak of the so-called “high culture fever” at around 1985. Newly translated and introduced theories in Western philosophy and culture appeared not just as knowledge of a different nature, but also as theoretical tools of self-reflection and introspection—to criticize the old cult. These loosely categorized two schools of critical thinking in many ways intertwined with each other, and more interestingly, were also connected to intellectuals whose approaches to traditional culture were of a more positive nature.

As many have noted, just like the editorial board of *Culture: China and the World*, the Academy of Chinese Culture (*zhongguo wenhua shuyuan*), with Tang Yijie as one of its leading figures, was a “conscious participant” and even “one of the driving forces” of the cultural debate.\(^{353}\) Yet unlike cultural critics that argued against Confucianism, the Academy played an important role in advocating the values and concepts of traditional Chinese thought as “the moral foundation of contemporary Chinese culture”.\(^{354}\) It was also associated with a “revival of neo-Confucianism” in mainland China amidst the high culture fever, which was aided by overseas neo-Confucian scholars such as Tu Weiming and Yu Yingshi.\(^{355}\)

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\(^{354}\) Davies, *Worrying About China*, p. 132.

\(^{355}\) Wang, *High Culture Fever*, pp. 64-78.
Obviously, many important figures of the cultural fever, such as philosopher Li Zehou, cannot be simply categorized into camps of one or another described above. And very often, their viewpoints were not mutually exclusive. For example, Tang Yijie warned against the celebrations of “Chinese cultural quintessence” of being vulnerable to the tendency of extreme nationalism and authoritarian rule in the name of such uniqueness, which shared the same critical spirit with those advocated anti-traditionalism.

It is justified to say that, during the cultural fever, the landscape was shaped by a methodological eclecticism and a sentimental enthusiasm as reflected in the titles of the series—marching towards “the world” and “the future”. Looking back at the 1980s, the critical inquiries remain the most remarkable phenomenon memorized by its participants and later commentators, and criticism of traditional Chinese culture and the national character formed the major theme of the cultural fever.\footnote{Merle Goldman, Perry Link, and Su Wei, “China’s Intellectuals in the Deng Era: Loss of Identity with the State,” in Lowell Dittmer and Samuel Kim (ed.), China’s Quest for National Identity (Ithaca, NY [etc.]: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 125-153: 143.}

Equally important, the critical inquiries were characterized by a crisis mentality similar to that of intellectuals around the time of Liang Qichao and Lu Xun. Many intellectuals began to view China’s position in history and in the world from a new perspective, and in the 1980s their reflections led to the conclusion that the country was lagging behind in the modernization process. Once again, they felt the country’s development had been hindered by tradition, and once again, they were propelled by a sense of responsibility to lift the heavy burden of the past. Affected by the “social psychology of a people dreaming of an attainable utopian future”,\footnote{Wang, High Culture Fever, p. 37.} while busily involved in their projects of thought enlightenment, they also had to respond to their crisis consciousness.

It was against such a background that the issue of Chinese national character was brought up again, first from overseas. Sun Longji published his “fresh and provocative”\footnote{Barmé and Minford, Seeds of Fire, p. xvi.} monograph The Deep Structure of Chinese Culture in the U.S. in 1983, in which he expressed his alienation from his native culture. As he later commented, “the antipathy” towards his own culture was “so strong that the cultural critique even went far beyond the national character critique in a general sense”.\footnote{Sun Longji, Zhongguo wenhua de shenceng jiegou, p. 4.}

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\footnote{Davies, Worrying About China, p. 144.}
\footnote{Wang, High Culture Fever, p. 37.}
\footnote{Sun Longji, Zhongguo wenhua de shenceng jiegou, p. 4.}
\end{footnotesize}
In Taiwan, Bo Yang published *The Ugly Chinaman* in 1985, and depicted Chinese society as “a sauce vat” (*jiang gang*) and the Chinese people living in such a vat as ill. Obviously, the patients need to be treated by doctors—cultural critics and reformers like himself. To reform the sauce vat culture, he contended, one has to realize that Confucianism is “conservative” and “stands against progress”.\(^{361}\)

Publications such as *The Ugly Chinaman* had significant influence on the national character discussion in mainland China. Intended to invoke the ambition of Lu Xun, they represented a state of mind that was “both Chinese and cosmopolitan” and continuous efforts “to confront the dilemma of being Chinese in the twentieth century”.\(^{362}\) Undoubtedly, their ultimate concern was the fate of the Chinese nation, yet what has made them distinctive was the expression of anxiety over crisis, sometimes even the mood of “doom and fatalism” reflected in the “impassioned attack on the weakness of the national character,”\(^{363}\) as Geremie Barmé read in works such as *Winds on the Plain* (*huangyuan feng*).\(^{364}\)

The critiques of the national character by Sun Longji and Bo Yang soon resonated in mainland China, capturing the conflicting sentiments and crisis consciousness of that time. In the “cultural fever”, critical intellectuals made various efforts to explain the nation’s troubles with its history and cultural tradition. The 1988 television documentary series *River Elegy* criticized the agrarian servility that it claimed to be deeply rooted in the national psyche, and marked the culmination as well as the end of the cultural fever.

### 2) *River Elegy* and the Anti-traditionalism of the 1980s

*River Elegy* was a declaration of social and cultural crisis, and, as a response to such crisis, a passionate call to discard the yellow inland civilization—the old agrarian culture—in order to embrace the blue, oceanic civilization represented by the West. The dualism in such cultural critique was repeatedly demonstrated: the Yellow River, the Great Wall, and the dragon symbolize the backward, conservative and impotent

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\(^{361}\) Bo Yang, *Choulou de Zhongguoren*, p. 54.


Chinese civilization; and the blue ocean is a metaphor for the progressive, aggressive and powerful Western civilization. The cultural symbols were used to interpret the irreconcilable tensions between Chinese and Western civilizations, in the form of tradition versus modernity, Confucian servility versus Enlightenment, and despotism versus democracy.

The scriptwriters, with highly emotionally charged vocabulary and rhetoric, attempted to analyze China’s problems through these cultural symbols and to provide, once and for all, their ultimate solutions to these problems that had been haunting the nation for centuries. In a way, River Elegy held a “national referendum on the symbol system of Chinese identity”, and with “a stridently didactic tone”, by “equating Maoist-Stalinist orthodoxy with state Confucianism and traditional culture”, it denounced cultural tradition as a disastrous legacy from the ancient agrarian society, only creating people of a servile nature in despotism. In the perceptions of the scriptwriters, Confucian culture was unable of conceiving science and democracy, nor was it able to create a spirit of progress for the nation. Yet its forces were still strong enough to strike back and strangle hopes for a modern China.

As Jing Wang put it, River Elegy is an interesting discourse “in its own right”. It reflected the conflicting moods of optimism and pessimism of its time, and revealed the ideological ambivalence of the enlightened minds that are, ironically, “no less nostalgic for power symbolism than their historical Confucian counterparts whom they roundly condemn”. More importantly, it represented a mode of thinking in the Chinese liberalism of the 1980s that argues “along universalist lines for the forward-development of China”.

The influences of critical intellectual thinking of the 1980s was quite obvious in River Elegy. It drew theories of critical inquiries, for instance, most notably from Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng’s thesis of “ultra-stable structure” to demonstrate the working of conservative forces in Chinese society. Its cry to break away from tradition and the

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367 Wang, High Culture Fever, p. 120.
368 Wang, High Culture Fever, pp. 120-121.
369 Vukovich, China and Orientalism, p. 18.
sense of responsibility—almost a moral imperative—as reflected in such a cry, resembled very much the passionate call from Gan Yang’s 1985 article *On Several Issues in the 1980s’ Cultural Debate*. In this article, Gan Yang envisioned the future of Chinese culture with a few assumptions. First of all, Gan believed that modern China’s backwardness has to be explained through its culture, just as the success and prosperity of the West in modern times lay in Western culture. As modernization in its roots was the modernization of culture, to strengthen the country then required a total reform of the culture. Such an assumption, attributing socio-political problems to the nation’s cultural tradition, is reminiscent of what was later called by its critics as “cultural determinism”.

Secondly, Gan contended that traditional culture was in conflict with modernization, and such a historical conflict was inevitable. This was based on his understanding of modernization as a process featured by its thoroughness, totality, and comprehensiveness of changes. Gan believed that discontinuity with the past was a problem that every nation would face once they entered the process of modernization, and China was no exception. Therefore, he proposed to break traditional cultural-psychological structure and to reconstruct the social, cultural, and psychological form of the nation.

Its underlying view of history was one with tradition being placed at the very opposite of modernity. In fact, Gan perceived anti-traditionalism as the best way to create tradition: “we should create what the Chinese in the past did not have—new and modern national cultural psychological structure”. On this note, Gan argued that to reform the overall system and structure of Chinese culture was in line with Lu Xun’s calls to reform the national character, because both aimed to liberate Chinese people from the heavy shackles of the past. As he contended, the inability to overcome the heavy cultural burden came from the anxiety to hold on to the uniqueness of Chinese culture, and the fear of being changed into a nation other than the Chinese nation.

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374 Gan, “Bashi niandai”, p. 34.
376 Gan, “Bashi niandai”, p. 45.
To overcome such anxiety and fear, Gan proposed to transform the spatial issue of “China-West” to the temporal problematic of “tradition-modernity”, a point he elaborated later.\textsuperscript{377} From this perspective, the crisis of Chinese culture was seen as essentially a result of the tension between pre-modern and modern societies—between the traditional culture and a modern culture that was yet to be constructed.

These aspects of Gan’s theory—the cultural deterministic view, the urge to break away from tradition to achieve modernity, and the belief in the thorough reform of traditional culture and national character—were clearly reflected in River Elegy. It has to be noted that, Gan was very critical of the latter for simplifying the problematic to propagate its message.\textsuperscript{378} Yet, Gan’s criticism of River Elegy notwithstanding, they both represented a mode of critical thinking that was prevalent during high cultural fever, a mode of thinking that provided the context for the discourse of national character.

3) Revisiting the May Fourth: Another Battle between the Old and the New

In the reflections of the scriptwriters and later commentators, the River Elegy mentality and the radical proposal for cultural reforms were intimately related to the May Fourth Movement. Chinese intellectuals in the reform era, waking up from Mao’s myth with China at the center of world revolution, discovered that what was deemed by socialist ideology as “a brand new China” was not that different from “the feudalistic society” that it initially stood against. The introspection of the Cultural Revolution thus traced back, once again, to Confucianism, which at the time was labelled as representative of feudalistic culture. Therefore, the sense of anxiety in the 1980s made it very receptive to the way of thinking that had once characterized cultural critiques of the May Fourth Movement, which requires an “overall solution to China’s problems”.\textsuperscript{379}

The reflections of the most recent past and the imperial “feudalist” past drew critical minds to wage a battle against these two “old” traditions with the weapon of the “new” tradition as created by the May Fourth Movement. In the 1980s, the predominant interpretation of the May Fourth Movement stresses its anti-traditional nature, taking it


\textsuperscript{378} Gan, \textit{Gujin zhongxi}, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{379} Su Xiaokang, \textit{Seminar on Chinese Storm}, pp. 21 & 22.
as the best way to develop tradition and Chinese culture. The May Fourth Movement was perceived as having created, in its embryonic form, a new Chinese cultural tradition. It was now, in the 1980s, the time for Chinese intellectuals to continue their great cause. In the spirit of this new tradition, a battle began to fight against the old Confucian tradition, “to try and expand the differences, divergence and antagonism, even willing to stand at the exact opposite of the past so that the present is not to be engulfed by the past”.  

One of the most significant features of this new tradition was self-criticism. Introspection took the form of radical self-negation: the total abandonment of traditional culture, and a thorough reform of the national character. As one author of River Elegy wrote, “the River Elegy team was connected by one common belief, which...was rigorous self-criticism”.  

In fact, in the most important texts of the 1980s, the spirit of self-criticism is everywhere to be seen. Only now intellectuals walked through the decades around May Fourth within a few years. As one of the chief authors of River Elegy, Su Xiaokang, later summarized in his reflection:

> The loss of faith in Communism, mixed with the inferiority complex caused by a loss of faith in traditional culture, led to a sense of eschatology in society...which had obvious impact on the intelligentsia...To deal with the urgent questions in Chinese reality, we always wanted to seek an answer from culture and history, to locate its origin from tradition, which was a vogue probably caused by (the anti-tradition) tradition since the May Fourth Movement.

As demonstrated in the case of River Elegy, self-criticism and even self-loathing went hand in hand with the tendency to render perplexing socio-political problems into an over-simplified cultural rhetoric, and to seek an interpretation of contemporary issues from cultural tradition and the national character. In this sense, it also bore great similarities with the cultural movements around the time of Liang’s “new people” thesis, created by Liang in his spirit of “challenging myself of yesterday with myself of today”. Such a mentality, as I have analyzed in Chapter Two, has led to a superiority-inferiority complex in Chinese search for a cultural identity in the years that followed.

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382 Su, Seminar on Chinese Storm, p. 21.
This complex is described very clearly in Jing Wang’s analysis of *River Elegy* and the culture fever:

> Su Xiaokang and his generation of intellectuals inherited not only the iconoclastic tradition of their predecessors, but also the superiority-inferiority complex that characterizes the May Fourth generation’s reflection of China’s past....it seems inevitable that in the context of enlightenment as such, any introspective look into China’s historical past engenders an ambivalent attitude that makes Chinese intellectuals at once proud of and hostile towards their own cultural and national heritage, while defiant toward and subservient to the imported Western culture at the same time.\(^{383}\)

However, while *River Elegy* was marking the last milestone of the high culture fever, revaluation of the critical attitude towards tradition was already under way. It took only a few years before the vigorous anti-traditionalism itself was under criticism, and ironically, from the so-called cultural radicals themselves.

In their reflections, many who had in the mid-1980s criticized traditional culture began to question the modernist framework such as been identified in texts like *River Elegy*. As one commentator remarked, to use modernist ideology to argue against socialist ideology, it was “a profound irony of new enlightenment”.\(^{384}\) Three years after his famous manifesto of radicalism, Gan Yang was already “very dissatisfied with it”,\(^{385}\) for the reflection on tradition was no longer able to cover the problem of the perceived modernization:

> To say “the best way to develop tradition is exactly to fight against tradition” [...] doesn’t mean that we require a total abandonment of traditional culture, not to mention a denial of our affection towards traditional culture [...]. On the one hand, we tend to negate and criticize traditional culture; on the other hand, we are also positive/affirmative about it, therefore unwilling to part with it. We look forward to (build) a modern society, yet at the same time we


\(^{385}\) Gan, *Zhongguo dangdai wenhua yishi* (Fanpan pian), p. 46.
remain deeply skeptical and uncertain [...]. This complicated and often paradoxical feeling will puzzle us for a long time, and force intellectuals of our generation to fight at two frontiers: not only with a critical attitude towards traditional culture, but at the same time remaining cautious and critical towards the modern society.386

Therefore, soon in 1988, he turned into his “cultural conservatism” (wenhua baoshou zhuyi) with “critical spirit”387, to safeguard cultural tradition as embodied in Confucianism.388 He then no longer saw Confucianism as incompatible with the modern world; rather, he acknowledged it as value rationality that should not be judged by its usefulness, or be relegated into the instrumental tool to modernity. Once the motto of fighting against tradition was abandoned, Gan made his new proposal by quoting Edmund Burke, “we compare, we reconcile, (and) we balance.” As such, he seemed to have found the new meaning of Confucianism in the modern world.389

That is why, although contemporary cultural critiques often link the 1980s together with the May Fourth Movement, looking back at both with a sense of nostalgia, they also stress the fact that the 1980s was not only a mere copy of the May Fourth Movement, it had also critical reflections of the May Fourth. Such is the opinion of literary scholar Chen Pingyuan, one of the active participants of the 1980s cultural fever:

*But (in the 1980s) they did more than just follow; they started reflections, rethinking, and went beyond...there were reflections on the Cultural Revolution, the history of the PRC, and even the May Fourth.*

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Similarly, what we have observed is that contemporary cultural critiques are making conscious efforts to follow, and at the same time to critically reflect on, cultural propositions of the 1980s, the May Fourth and beyond. They have made use of such historical legacies as a frame of reference and incorporated previous critiques in their reinterpretation of tradition. While doing so, they also share many characteristics with

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389 Gan, *Gujin zhongxi*, pp. 113 & 123.
previous critiques, such as voicing their social and political discontent through cultural critiques, and expressing their concerns with contemporary issues by reinterpreting history and tradition.

3.3. Liberal Optimism and Its China Complex

Anti-traditionalism and iconoclasm in the reform era, as I suggested earlier, is better understood against the global background of increasing cultural exchange between China and the outside world. River Elegy’s quest to reform the dying culture is the quest to embrace Enlightenment and the West where it originated: the Yellow River should conquer the fear of change, accept “the invitation from the sea”, and, “after thousands of years of a lonely journey”, eventually “return to the blue ocean where the origin of life is”. Both Jiang Rong and Wang Xiaofeng, in their vigorous criticism of Chinese national character, perceive the West as either a “stronger” or a “more advanced” civilization from which the Chinese nation has to learn if its fatal defects are to be uprooted.

Similar to the “new people” thesis of Liang Qichao, in the reform era, the discourse of national character is characterized by the strong presence of the West. The significance of the West is two-fold. It is a frame of reference within which the Chinese nation is evaluated—the Other to compare the national Self with; simultaneously, Western perceptions of China as a part of imported Western knowledge and worldviews have directly influenced Chinese self-perceptions.

For example, River Elegy drew the image of China as a stagnated culture from Adam Smith: “In 1776 Adam Smith published the famous The Wealth of Nations declaring that Chinese history and culture had come to a standstill. He maintained that the ignorance of foreign trade leads to stagnation, and closing the door is suicidal. Unfortunately, no Chinese heard these words in time”. Indeed, such an interpretation of history was also in accordance with Hegel’s theory: history began in Asia, but Asia has fallen behind. The agrarian civilization is constrained by the land; if people are limited by their dependence on the land, they are unable to transcend the earthly thoughts and behavior.

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391 Su Xiaokang 苏晓康 (ed.), “He Shang” 河觞 in Cong Wusi dao Heshang 从五四到河觞, appendix 2, pp. 382 & 423.
It is not surprising to note that, when Su Xiaokang recalled the time he was working on the documentary, he remembered to have Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, and H. G. Wells’s *The Outline of History* on his desk.\(^{393}\) Cultural debates in the 1980s consciously incorporated theories, languages, and opinions from Euro-American scholarship. Cultural rethinking was also characteristically accompanied by embracing Western thoughts of almost all schools. The West as a subject of learning has become the stronger Other to learn from.

The “invitation” from the sea indicated not only Chinese aspirations for Western thought, but also the international context of such aspirations. Anti-traditionalism in the 1980s was supported by a sense of liberal optimism about China’s future not only at home but also from abroad. A China that is engaged in a modernization process, and the consequent vision of a liberal country in East-Asia, were welcomed by “the free world”. Changes brought about by the reforms and opening-up were seen as the second revolution, and, until the time of *River Elegy*, Deng Xiaoping appeared in the West as a decisive reformer that was leading the country towards a free market and even a liberal society. These Western perceptions were echoed by the same optimism in liberal thoughts among Chinese intellectuals.

### 1) The Rise and Fall of “America’s China”

Western perceptions of China have gone through drastic transitions since the time of Arthur Smith. The “missionary mind” of Smith’s time has within a century evolved into a combination of racial prejudice, paternalistic sentiments and the belief in an “America’s China”. As time changed, the focus of the relationship shifted from one part of the mixture to another, and a certain perception became dominant. As James Reed argued, as early as in 1906, when the Chinese abolished the traditional Confucian examination system, the mission boards saw a chance of Christianity in China, and China missions grew rapidly.\(^{394}\) Between 1911 and 1915, China was already “a particular national incarnation of the universal vision”\(^{395}\) of America’s “Manifest Destiny”—that America is responsible to propagate its values and beliefs around the globe. This, he explained, is the cause of American sentiments towards China:


The fact seems to be that, during the years 1911 to 1915 at least, Christian prayer was the principal American activity regarding East Asia. Understanding this, the historian can begin to appreciate why Americans characteristically responded to problems in East Asia policy with “expressions of feeling rather than contributions to the discussion”.396

These sentiments were directed by many historical and cultural developments to the acceptance of a favorable image by the American public after the 1920s. Despite the Boxer Uprising, American religious and educational institutions in China had successfully gained influence. Strategically, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor turned China into America’s ally. Under these circumstances, many saw a country that was fighting against a common enemy and a people that shared American values and looked upon America with gratitude.

Thus, it seemed that a combination of sympathy and paternalism had won over racial antagonism; and the inscrutable heathen seemed more familiar than ever. Possibilities for a better China emerged—for missionaries, a country led by Christians like Chiang Kai-Shek; for businessmen, a huge market; and for politicians, a democratic government in the future of East Asia—and hopes for a Christian China and an Americanized China were high. Behind such rationale was the firmly established belief that, despite all the differences, the Chinese could be like Americans, they wanted to be like Americans, and they would eventually become Americans.

From the 1930s, missionaries played a vital role in building the image of China as an ally and even a hero. Among those categorized as “the sinophiles”,397 Pearl Buck’s The Good Earth and other publications contributed to a humane image of the Chinese through its peasant protagonist Wang Long; Henry Luce’s Time magazine continuously depicted a positive image of the Chiang government—both Buck and Luce were missionary children, both born in China. Pearl Buck later invited Lin Yutang to write a book about China, his My Country and My People enjoyed its own popularity, though much smaller when compared to The Good Earth.398 Apparently, at this time, the reading public was more ready to appreciate the charm of Chinese wisdom.

396 Reed, The Missionary Mind, p. 39.
398 Isaacs, Images of Asia, p. 156.
This could explain the success of Madame Chiang’s lobby in the U.S. before and after the Second World War. As one journalist later commented, her efforts to create and reinforce the image of Chinese people as sympathetic Christian wards turned out to be a huge success:

As a fluent English speaker, as a Christian, as a model of what many Americans hoped China to become, Madame Chiang struck a chord with American audiences as she traveled across the country, starting in the 1930’s, raising money and lobbying for support of her husband’s government. She seemed to many Americans to be the very symbol of the modern, educated, pro-American China they yearned to see emerge -- even as many Chinese dismissed her as a corrupt, power-hungry symbol of the past they wanted to escape.^[399]

It is around the same time that another image-forming book, Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China*,[^400] also appeared. Its publication, some years after *The Good Earth*, “was well and widely received” and “made its deepest impression on increasingly worried and world-conscious liberal intellectuals”.[^401] It created the impression of the Chinese Communists as dedicated warriors fighting against Japanese invasion under extremely difficult situations. Though caused much controversy later, it eventually became a classic in the study of the War and Communist China. But few could anticipate that it was the beginning of the “loss” of China. After the war, when the Communist Party came to power, the Americans had to come to terms with these emotions—mostly the loss of a dream that almost came true in China.

For the missionary minds, the victory of the Communist Party and the establishment of its regime in 1949 was especially difficult to accept. Once active in lobbying for the Nationalist government, they usually became hostile to the Communist regime. For example, medical missionary Walter Judd “promoted the containment of Communism policy that dominated the 1950s”.[^402] Henry Luce, for many years after the war, had his

[^401]: Isaacs, *Images of Asia*, p. 163.
magazines paint the horrible Red China for the American public.

During the Cold War, a new picture of China emerged. With few exceptions, the People’s Republic of China was replaced with “Red China” or “Communist China”. High school history textbooks pictured an ancient China that once had a chance to modernize, but was interrupted in this process by the development of Communism. The internal conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists was described in terms of the international conflict between the free world and the totalitarian Soviet power. Western reports on China consisted of the Communist Party as the red brigand and the common people as blue ants; the Korean War and the bitter experience of people; Red Guards, big character posters during the Cultural Revolution. All these seemed to prove China as a country of terror and mystery, isolated and alienated from the Western world. Consequently, China, once potentially one of “us”—Christian, modernized, and liberal, now alienated itself into one of “them”—a Communist enemy. “Our China”, which had shared American values and beliefs, became “their Communist China”, now under the influence of an ideology which threatened America: Pearl Buck’s Wang Long had turned back to Fu Manchu.

2) Winds of Change for “the Grey China”

Chinese encounters with the outside world began to take a groundbreaking shift when U.S. President Nixon visited China in 1972. It was followed by a positive turn in Western perceptions of China. By the time of China’s reforms and opening up, a more favorable image was created in Western media. Deng Xiaoping was chosen as Man of the Year (1985) by Time Magazine for having “reshaped China by embracing free-market reforms”. New cultural constructions about China had begun, and it was now pictured as a country undergoing a great experiment.

Although China as a perceived reality or a cultural construction was never at the center of American imagination, the “liberal myth” created in the following years has placed China as a “secondary reference point” in American cultural debate that has centered

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on the meaning of ideas such as freedom and democracy.\textsuperscript{405} As Richard Madsen argues, the cultural myth about China in the 1980s helped sustain “an American sense of hopefulness about its own democratic identity”.\textsuperscript{406}

Although the tragedy of Tian’anmen in 1989 contradicted this common interpretation of “the American Dream”,\textsuperscript{407} the belief in the impact of free market on social democracy was strong enough to face the challenge towards American liberal optimism. For example, the “end of history” thesis\textsuperscript{408} claimed the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government, which marked the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution. Though later widely criticized and argued against, it demonstrated the magnitude and depth of American liberal optimism.

During the cold war, the U.S. strategy was to “find a way to go through the Iron Curtain and launch a peaceful competition between the two systems… [and to] deconstruct the Communist system from within”.\textsuperscript{409} At that time, the Chinese were warned that Western countries were raging a third world war through a peaceful evolution (heping yanbian) within socialist countries. However, pragmatism eventually overcame ideological differences. Decades later, as China becomes an indispensable part of globalization, the term “peaceful evolution” is rarely heard any more. The commercialized and capitalized Chinese society is a reality in the name of “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. These changes seem to be a “diplomatic victory of the U.S.”:

\begin{quote}
From the beginning of the Cold War, it has been the central tenet of U.S. foreign policy that, if we could engage as much of the world as possible in successful economic growth, through domestic reform and what came later to be called globalization, we could stabilize Europe and Asia, win the Cold War, and create a stable global order. ....This strategy has proved to be one of the most successful geopolitical strategies in human history, so much so that it has entangled our former enemies as well as our allies in the web we wove. What we never expected from our strategy was that it would entice our former
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[408] Francis Fukuyama, \textit{The End of History and the Last Man} (Free Press, 1992).
\end{footnotes}
adversaries, including China, into our web of economic institutions and our commitment to geopolitical stability.\textsuperscript{410}

Therefore, with regard to issues in China, the liberal optimism in turning the country into one of “us” was comparable with the “missionary mind” at the turn of the century—both assuming that it is America’s “manifest destiny” to convert the world into an American world. Their differences lie in that, this time the winds of change were brought by the power of free market rather than gospels.

Admittedly, such optimism has been confronted with observations of the Chinese “reality”.\textsuperscript{411} As one media study suggests, if one roughly describes American perceptions of the People’s Republic of China as having evolved through the phases of “the red China” (1949-1979), “the green China” (1979-1989), and “the dark China” (1989-1992), then, after 1992 the image is one of “the grey China”.\textsuperscript{412} Although increasing ties between the two countries has resulted in an increasing number of media coverage, the overall image of China has been “consistently negative” since 1992.\textsuperscript{413} Similarly, a research on congressional debates on China-related issues in 1999-2000 also suggests that, although congressional views are “widely disparate”, in general “strongly negative views” are fostered by “unconstructive moralizing” and “demonizing”.\textsuperscript{414}

These prevalent media and political attitudes towards China reveal that a strong tendency has been dominating perceptions of China with which Chinese culture has been interpreted according to “American standards of evolutionary progression”\textsuperscript{415}, to a certain extent that such perceptions could even be seen as “tainted with an ethnocentric


\textsuperscript{413} Peng, “Representation of China”, p. 64.


\textsuperscript{415} Thomas Laszlo Dorogi, Tainted Perceptions: Liberal-Democracy and American Popular Images of China (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001), p. 79.
negativity”⁴¹⁶. Most of the criticism includes issues such as human rights, freedom of speech, religious freedom, lack of transparency, and so on, casting a rather suspicious light on China’s economic development and rising international power.

It is exactly the “grey China” with its unsatisfactory “reality” that invites the winds of change envisioned with a sense of liberal optimism. For those both in China and outside who believe in liberal values and their Chinese adaptation, it is this liberal optimism that offers them a common ground to base their understanding of Chinese reality and their wish for forces from outside to reform the country for the better.

A century ago, Arthur Smith wished for Christianity to play such a role as the force from outside; Liang Qichao drew from Western liberal thought for Chinese cultural tradition “to reflect, to change, and to mend”;⁴¹⁷ Lu Xun cherished the foreign perspective as an outside force for Chinese people to “do self-inspection, to analyze, to reform, to struggle, then to prove what on earth are Chinese”.⁴¹⁸ In the reform era, such outside forces are to be found in perceived universal values, for example, individual liberty, rule of law, freedom of speech, and last but not the least, rationality, as reflected in the free market system and political democracy.

3) The West as the Other

As I have analyzed in Chapter Two, the discourse of national character in the time of Liang Qichao was a part of intellectual responses to modern Western conceptions and perceptions of China during its historical transition from an empire to a nation-state. In this chapter, the analysis of the discourse of national character has also demonstrated that, in the reform era, the West remains the major frame of reference for cultural reformers whose vision of enlightenment and modernity have been inspired by core values of Western liberal thought, however such values might be interpreted differently in one context from another.

It is in this light that Dirlik’s concept of “self-orientalization” and Vukovich’s description of “internalized Orientalism” provide us insight in understanding such a phenomenon of vigorous self-criticism. In a way, Chinese critics of the national character have internalized the liberal optimism in the universality of its core values, as

⁴¹⁶ Dorogi, Tainted Perceptions, p. 79.
⁴¹⁷ Liang, Xinmin Shuo, p. 15.
well as the perception of the “Grey China” that is in urgent need of such values to achieve its second transition—a transition from the pre-modern mentality to a modern national psychological make-up.

Their incorporation of Western perceptions are different in many ways from that of Liang Qichao’s. Liang’s “new people” thesis was charged with a strong and romanticized nationalism, and his incorporation of Western perceptions can be read as a means to aid the birth of a new Chinese nation. Contemporary critiques of the national character, inspired by liberal universalism (pushi zhuyi) that is vigilant towards nationalism, do not inherit the aspiration for a sovereign state, as it is apparently no longer necessary, or not even a stronger national power; instead they request a state of being of the national culture that is, in their eyes, genuinely modern.

As the discourse of national character from the time of Liang Qichao until today has been under the influence of Western knowledge production and importation, they have also argued, to various extents, along a modernist line and within a modernist framework. The influence has been visible not only in their imagination of modernity, but also their transformed perceptions of the world as well as the position of China within such a world. Therefore, another form of the presence of the West has been the consequent Chinese self-perceptions shadowed by the hegemonic power of Western culture.

As I have introduced previously, Gloria Davies describes Chinese critical inquiries as characterized by “patriotic worrying” (youhuann), a mentality of critical intellectuals to worry about the nation’s imperfection and an urge to work towards national perfection. Even in the reform era, when national sovereignty is no longer at stake, sharp contrasts between China and the West as observed by critical intellectuals have resulted in an inferiority complex, and forced some intellectuals to place Chinese culture in an inferior position as compared to Western culture. From such a perspective, Chinese culture is not just imperfect, it is at the edge of becoming extinct due to the powerful existence of Western culture. This crisis consciousness does not urge intellectuals to worry about national perfection, it pushes them to worry about national survival.

The crisis mentality of such a nature is reflected in the discourse of national character. Jiang Rong in his Wolf Totem worries that, such magnificent agrarian culture as the Chinese civilization, once invaded by a strong force from the outside, might be driven
into museums or historical ruins if it does not change its obedient nature.\textsuperscript{419} And only by uprooting the sheep-like national character, can the nation survive fierce global competition.\textsuperscript{420} Similarly, River Elegy articulated an intellectual fear that the nation was to be “expelled from the global community”.\textsuperscript{421} It declared that the crisis of national survival and the crisis of civilization broke out simultaneously, as Western civilization is a new civilization that the ancient agricultural civilization can no longer assimilate.\textsuperscript{422}

And such crisis mentality is a common feature shared not only by mainland Chinese intellectuals. Bo Yang in his Ugly Chinaman expressed similar concerns over the survival of Chinese culture. As he described, the ruins of American Indians had caused him “excruciating pain” for he could not help but wonder whether one day the Chinese nation would end up like them.\textsuperscript{423} It is precisely this crisis consciousness that drove him to diagnose the “sickness” of his own culture and to practice what Barmé phrased as “literary acupuncture”.\textsuperscript{424}

Even at the heyday of China’s economic miracle, the crisis consciousness of Bo Yang resonated in mainland China. In 2007, one intellectual, in his analysis of Chinese and Western modern encounters, in the same vein lamented the decadency of American Indian culture as he asked, “The few decedents of the Indians could probably sit in a Lincoln or Cadillac car, in a Boeing 747 or even Concorde plane. However, does it help to (prevent) the tragic extinction of the whole nation?”\textsuperscript{425} It seems that the economic growth and the consequent rising power of China have not eliminated the feeling of cultural inferiority in the perceived competition with a stronger West.

Wittingly or not, the critics of the national character have been looking at their own culture with the lense of the Other, assuming the inferiority of the Self and imagining its change towards “the better”, of which the Western Other is the exemplary. It is through such a lense that the national character is perceived as so loathsome and so not modern. It is also because of such a “Westernized” perspective that the critics

\textsuperscript{419} Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{420} Jiang, Lang Tuteng, p. 283.
\textsuperscript{421} Su, Cong Wusi dao Heshang, p. 399.
\textsuperscript{422} Su, Cong Wusi dao Heshang, p. 382.
\textsuperscript{423} Bo, Choulou de Zhongguoren, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{424} Barmé, Seeds of Fire, p. xviii.
\textsuperscript{425} He Zhaowu 何兆武, Zhongxi wenhua jiaoliu shilun 中西文化交流史论 (Wuhan: hubei renmin chubanshe, 2007), p. 5.
themselves have been criticized, which will be discussed later.

3.4. Concluding Remarks: Self-criticism as Moral Obligation

This chapter has shown that, for critics of the national character, their self-perceptions and approaches towards a cultural identity have been influenced by their predecessors in the late Qing and early Republican periods as well as contemporary Western liberal understandings of China that have been prominent on a global scale. Their imaginations of a future Chinese nation and national culture are supported by a belief in the values embedded in Western-style modern societies. With the presumption of the universality of Western values, they hold fast to a sense of liberal optimism that they share with those in the West who imagine a similar cultural change in China, an idea that can be traced back to the “missionary mind” of Arthur Smith’s times.

While placing contemporary discourse of national character in its historical and international contexts has shed light on why and how it has come into being, this chapter also suggests that a crisis mentality has been particularly important in the quest for a new cultural identity. I have argued that the self-consciousness of a late-comer to modernity has prompted critical intellectuals to pursue an envisioned cultural integrity and identity with a sense of unprecedented urgency and historical responsibility.

Contemporary advocates of national character reforms share this mentality with their predecessors of a century ago, taking it as their responsibility and even moral obligation to change the national culture into a better one. As was the case with Liang Qichao, the individual and the national Self in contemporary intellectual perceptions are closely related. Therefore, the “patriotic worrying” becomes almost a moral imperative to fix the problem of the nation. And for critical intellectuals, it manifests itself in their identification of national shortcomings and their attempts to improve the nation through fierce self-criticism, even at the risk of being called “shameless and depraved”.

In a way, critical intellectuals are conscious of their mission to enlighten the nation and steer the country in the right direction, a mission both self-imposed and assigned by the general public. For example, River Elegy identifies the intellectuals as “a special group” created by history “for the Chinese”. And their moral obligation is not only

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towards the Chinese present, but also towards the Chinese future: “Let our generation bear the heavy burden with our shoulders so that our next generations will never have to suffer.” One of its scriptwriters, in his reflection, described the almost sacred mission he felt obliged to honor: “our generation is destined to bear the heartfelt pain, and because of this, we might become great”.

The reading of contemporary critiques of the national character has concluded that it bears extraordinary similarities with those around the time of Liang Qichao and Hu Shi. If it is a moral obligation to modernize the nation through self-criticism, then to negate history becomes a means to eventually glorify history. History as the national past invokes both loathing and pride. It is precisely the past glory that made its loss unbearably humiliating, thus the statement in *River Elegy*: “our pride and our sadness are often the same thing”.

In a way, the lost glory and recent humiliation are two indispensable parts of the nation’s uniqueness. The haunting memory of humiliation can also be seen as an attempt to hold on to Chinese uniqueness: no other nation ever suffered from such an unprecedented downfall. Just as Hu Shi asked, “Is there a bigger shame than this in the world?” In the case of Jiang Rong, the feeling of shame was so strong that it almost turned into resentment. As he wrote through his protagonist, the aggressive wolf might be abhorrent, but cowardly people who act like sheep were far more loathsome. Such painful reflections are also seen in Bo Yang, Sun Longji, the texts of *River Elegy*, contemporary cultural critiques of Wang Xiaofeng and alike, expressing their self-loathing through vigorous criticism of Confucianism and Chinese culture. As Barmé put it, it “satisfies a need to explain China’s woeful modern history while at the same time reaffirming a prevalent sense of national uniqueness”.

Thus, interestingly, these cultural critics, radical or not, have demonstrated a crisis consciousness that they share with the guardians of cultural tradition and Confucianism. But while the latter perceives cultural tradition as a source of pride and glory, something to be preserved and rescued; cultural critics direct their “hoary

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429 Text from *River Elegy* Episode I: Searching for the dream.
430 Hu Shi 胡适, “Fei liuxue pian,” 非留学篇 Liuxue jibao, 留美学生季报 No. 3, January 1914.
anxiety of cultural and national self-reflection” towards the side of self-criticism and anti-traditionalism. From this perspective, the entanglement of self-loathing and profound pride becomes even rather logical. To use Bo Yang’s own confession as a doctor to the sick nation: “I criticize to remind you (your sickness) and hope you will recover, just because I love you.”

432 Davies, Worrying About China, p. 1.
433 Bo, Choulou de Zhongguoren, p. 5.