From the ‘Chinese National Character’ Debates of Yesterday to the Anti-China Foreign Policy of Today

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Retracing the basic contours of the debates about the ‘Chinese national character’, this essay considers the harkening back to the ‘national character’ discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by many liberal Sinophone dissident scholars in the 1980s and Hong Kong cultural critics in the 2000s as a reaction against decades of class discourse in China. This revival of cultural essentialism has since provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping anti-China foreign policy in the West today, thus limiting the horizon for alternative imaginaries of democratic politics.

Today, the foreign policy crusade against Chinese authoritarianism has united the Western establishment, and some of its most dedicated fighters are a passionate cohort of diaspora dissidents championing the United States as an alternative beacon. While many of these activists claim they target the Chinese regime and not the Chinese people, the language often slips. As Hong Kong prodemocracy poster child Joshua Wong writes in his recent book:

Hong Kong is just like a foster child who was raised by a white family and, without his consent, returned to his Chinese biological parents. Mother and son have very little in
common, from language and customs to the way they view their government. (Wong with Ng 2020: 21)

On one level, Wong accurately points out the Chinese Government’s tendency to unilaterally encroach on minority people’s rights and Hongkongers’ lack of choice in deciding their own political future. On another level, what is striking about this statement is the implicit essentialisation of the Chinese identity as something fundamentally irreconcilable with the Hongkonger one, and as something that plays a key role in determining individual political dispositions.

Wong’s implication that Chinese cultural values are somehow alien to democratic values represents a recurrent theme among the anticommunist diaspora—a discourse that has directly fuelled a ‘clash of civilisations’ narrative promoted by the hawkish Western establishment. This tendency to draw an implicit link between China’s repressive political system and Chinese culture’s inherent tendency to embrace authoritarian politics becomes particularly dangerous ammunition for the warmongering right-wing in the West, as most recently exemplified by neofascist political pundit Jesse Kelly’s comments about wanting US soldiers ‘to sit on a throne of Chinese skulls’ during a conversation with Tucker Carlson (Wade 2021). What the anti-China industry shows us today is that it insists on a crude politics governed by cultural determinism or essentialised models of cultural values that identify autocratic, backward politics with ‘Chineseness’ versus ‘democracy’ as represented by the West. Such a politics entails seeing Western governments as what Lin Yao (2021) has defined as a ‘civilisational beacon’—a phenomenon that was particularly evident, for instance, when most expatriate Hongkongers and Taiwanese Americans voted for Donald Trump in the 2019 US election (Shum and Hui 2020). In such a context, a rigid dichotomy is generally posited between liberal Chinese and Hongkonger ‘freedom lovers’—often neatly aligning with the discursive accents of US foreign policy regimes—and nationalist Chinese authoritarians.

More importantly, what political critics and activists have seldom investigated is how this essentialisation is a product of culturalist debates that borrows the terms of Western racist discourses—but with its own history, expressed in terms distinctive to the intellectual milieu of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. For more than a century, vigorous debates about what local intellectuals call ‘the Chinese national character’ (國民性), which sought to delineate the essential categories and values that determine what it means to be Chinese, consumed the intellectual circles of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The liberalising 1980s saw the rise of a generation of liberal dissidents—represented by the likes of Liu Xiaobo, Bo Yang, Wen Yuankai, and Sun Lungkee—who played, and continue to play, a role in setting the terms for these culturalist arguments. After the Handover, some cultural critics in Hong Kong—including Joe Chung and Chin Wan—took these theories to their logical conclusion and developed the intellectual basis for Hong Kong localism by essentialising and rejecting the category of ‘Chineseness’, calling instead for a political awakening based not on systemic transformation, but on ethnicisation of Hong Kong identity as something anchored by ‘Western’ political values. The price of failing to critically revisit these discussions is limiting our possibilities for struggle; this reductive binary between authoritarian China and the democratic West obscures how governments borrow techniques of repression from each other, and the fact we must identify our political lines beyond the terms set by deterministic cultural discourse.

Retracing the basic contours of the debates about ‘Chinese national character’, this essay considers the harkening back to the ‘national character’ discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by many liberal Sinophone dissident scholars in the 1980s and Hong Kong cultural critics in the 2000s as a reaction against decades of class discourse in China. This revival of cultural essentialism has since provided a key ideological register for dissidents, especially those on the frontlines of shaping anti-China foreign policy in the West today, thus limiting the horizon for alternative imaginaries of democratic politics.
To understand the anticommunist diaspora's inability to think beyond the ideological frames of the West, we must look to the lasting influence of the 'culture heat' (文化熱) of the 1980s in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, which included recharged debates about the 'Chinese national character'. Chinese intellectuals' essentialist views of China have a long history. Influenced by early Western discourses from scholars like Montesquieu, late-Qing and post–May Fourth writers like Yan Fu, Yang Du, and Liang Qichao followed French sociologist Gustave Le Bon's theories of 'national character' or 'soul' to advance a kind of cultural deterministic analysis of the Chinese people (Wu 2007). For Le Bon (1898), one can observe an 'aggregate of psychological elements' that remains relatively stable across time that determines the 'soul' of a particular people, which in turn determines their political institutions and choices. Le Bon's analysis stems from a distinctly reactionary perspective on mass movements—best exemplified in his seminal work on crowd psychology, which sees crowds as a negative extension of the unconscious predicated on the irrational and the anti-democratic. His early Chinese admirers built on this analysis to identify the Chinese national character across time as one of slavishness, requiring enlightened forms of autocracy to remain civilised. By the 1930s, these perspectives had spurred a critical reaction, including the so-called debate on Chinese social history (中國社會史論戰), which called for a political, economic, and structural understanding of Chinese culture, paving the way for the communist class critique presaged by early Marxists like Chen Duxiu and Guo Moruo—a frame that would remain in vogue for decades, especially after the ascent to power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The eclipse of early twentieth-century culturalist discourse by class analysis, however, did not give rise to fundamentally democratic paradigms. On the contrary, the CCP enabled new forms of mass politics while deepening authoritarian control over independent political action. This can be seen, for instance, in workplace politics. From the brief periods of union reform, shopfloor organising, and democratic debate in the 1950s to the 'workers' congresses' and popular and state-level rethinking of what socialism entails in the late 1970s and early 1980s, glimpses of democratic self-determination in the workplace emerged through action and debate only to be suppressed by the CCP bureaucracy (Sheehan 1998; Andreas 2019; Franceschini and Sorace 2022). While these experiments—especially shopfloor activism in the work units of the 1950s—helped inform a democratic, worker-centred praxis that we saw, among many other instances, in the urban resistance against martial law in the days leading up to the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 (Zhang 2022), the resurgence and rise of the culturalist discourse in the late 1980s market reform period testify to the unfortunate reality that class-conscious and left-wing paradigms have been identified with authoritarian rule, rather than the possibility for independent mass politics. In other words, there was no coherent discursive framework—nor the capacity for organising campaigns—to capture the democratic energies at the seams of Chinese society in this period.

In the 1980s, the space to even articulate, let alone reject, a class-based independent democratic politics in the Chinese context rapidly began to close. A new cultural renaissance accompanied the market reform period: from the Fifth Generation filmmakers (which included Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, among many others) and the controversial River Elegy television series, inspired by the Toward the Future book series (走向未來叢書) by Jin Guantao, to the myriad conferences at Peking University in the late 1980s, students in mainland China were exposed to Western cultural norms and, through these, began to articulate a different sort of politics of resistance against Beijing's authoritarianism. After the launch of the Four Modernisations Program in the late 1970s, the Chinese state and society's increasing openness to science and technology as part of its road to strengthening productive forces through market reforms proved to be a double-edged sword that bolstered the state's economic path to liberalisation while amplifying the dissident discourse of polit-
ical liberalisation (for an overview of the debates about ‘scientism’ in that period, see Hua 1995). If the early century moment represented a turn from cultural critique to structural and Marxist discourse, the late 1980s saw a reversal to culture. Besides being wrapped in the register of Western values, the discourse this time came to set the ideological groundwork for Western foreign policy institutions. As Chinese left-wing writer Zoe Zhao (2019) has observed in a recent essay on the legacy of the Tiananmen massacre, Chinese dissidents, especially those in the diaspora, now ‘tend to identify Western governments and parties, rather than civil society organisations struggling against them, as natural allies’.

Unlike the national character debates of the beginning of the century, the late 1980s version of this discourse emerged in reaction to decades of the CCP’s perversion of class critique. In fact, movement participants Chen Fongching and Jin Guantao (1997: 10) frame this historiography as a teleological movement towards ‘cultural development’, situating themselves and their compatriots in the 1980s as ‘one link in a long chain’ stretching back to the May Fourth Movement’s cultural debates. What really emerged was a crudely essentialised analysis of ‘Chinese values’, in which any vision of political reform must once again be waged on cultural grounds. This discourse has since powerfully constrained the anti-CCP movement, benefiting not only Western institutions but also the Communist Party, both of which sought to neutralise genuine class discourse more than ever to facilitate China’s turn to capitalism. For Westernised Chinese students, democratic resistance began to be framed in terms of liberal conceptions of ‘democracy’, which were portrayed as cultural and political properties of the West from which the Chinese national character is intrinsically alienated.

At the centre of these discussions was the question: is Chinese culture fundamentally compatible with democratic values? Writers like Bo Yang—the author of a polemical 1984 essay titled ‘The Ugly Chinaman’ (丑陋的中国人)—stoked controversy because of their caustic criticism of Chinese people as inferior and backward. As Bo (1992: 17) writes: ‘In his inferiority, a Chinese person is a slave; in his arrogance, he is a tyrant.’ The late Chinese political prisoner and liberal intellectual Liu Xiaobo went as far as to criticise the documentary series River Elegy—which purported to demonstrate the depravity of traditional Chinese culture, causing a great stir among Chinese intellectual circles in the late 1980s—for not promoting Westernisation enough. Scholar of aesthetics Li Zehou (1982) touched on this discussion in advocating for China to imitate the West’s Enlightenment paradigms, praising Yan Fu—who, as we have seen, was an early proponent of a deterministic view of Chinese culture—as a great thinker of modernisation. As cultural critic and historian Geremie Barmé (2019) writes: “‘National Character Studies’ was a thriving niche market in the Chinese publishing industry, first in Hong Kong from the 1970s and then on the Mainland since the early 1990s” (for more context, see also Barmé 2000).

Take a closer look at one exemplar of this market: Taiwanese academic Sun Lungkee’s 1982 The Deep Structure of Chinese Society (中國文化的深層結構) (Sun 2011). Widely read at the time in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, this book was a prominent instance of this discourse, even though it remains little discussed and has not been translated in full yet in English media and scholarship. In his multiple English-language scholarly articles on the topic, Sun has shown familiarity with and interest in the cultural debates of the late Qing and post–May Fourth periods (Sun 1986, 1987, 1992). In The Deep Structure of Chinese Society, he draws on the discussions of the Chinese national character earlier in the century to crudely critique Marxism (with frequent swipes at Chinese diaspora leftists of the 1970s) for failing to understand the ‘deep structures’ (深層結構) of Chinese society and reducing all cultural phenomena to questions of class. In particular, Sun writes that Chinese people have no conception of a rational ‘soul’ (靈魂) and instead hold an inferior notion of ‘heart’ (心) that disastrously compromises rational thinking and appeals more to the ‘body’ (身). For this reason, they are intrinsically determined by other forces, like familial ties or an authoritarian nation, while ‘lacking the capacity for self-organisation’ (不能自主) (Sun 2011: 71). According to Sun, in Chinese culture, more humanistic concerns about polit-
ical rights and democracy are substituted with cruder, depoliticised, and overly ‘affective’ (感情化) communal practices like nepotism, a slavish mindset that prioritises stability over creative change, and a lack of individuality. The CCP merely expresses the intrinsic paternalistic tendencies of the Chinese people on a national scale, and the people are satisfied with the lack of democracy and individuality if economic stability persists, since putting food on the table for the family trumps the value of ‘individual’ thinking (Sun 2011: 172).

There is much to criticise in Sun’s scholarship, but the most striking problem is what he excludes to construct his analysis—that is, generations of left-wing praxis that attend to independent and democratic mass politics. Sun’s argument about the intrinsic and essential characteristics of the Chinese people is grounded in a limited understanding of how democratic mass politics works. For Sun and his ilk, mass political action can never be revolutionary, independent, and democratic; it is always reduced to depoliticisation or irrational mob psychology, which Sun sees as antithetical to enlightened democratic thinking. Sun’s cultural paradigms narrow the political horizon of the Chinese people’s self-determination, reducing their options to either adopting the atomised colonial politics and identity of the West or resorting to slavish state-nationalist apologia. Writing under the pseudonym ‘Lau Yufan’ in 1988, Hong Kong socialist Au Loong Yu published a critique of Sun’s book in which he explained how Sun’s reductive framing obscures the material ways in which democratic gains are achieved by any people or movement—that is, how the history of democratic reforms in the West is not ‘simply because of Western culture’s “deep structure” of intrinsic democratic values, but as a direct effect of modern mass democratic struggles’ (Lau 1988: 17). Indeed, the legacy of the anticommunist diaspora activists precisely exemplifies the reality of this disastrous binary thinking on a larger scale: since Tiananmen, many if not most CCP dissidents are unable (or unwilling) to conceptualise and build campaigns that are not tethered to the machinations of the Western foreign policy establishment. Borrowing Sun Yat-sen’s characterisation of the Chinese people as ‘a heap of loose sand’, Sun Lungkee’s conclusion ridicules Chinese people as atomised (Sun 2011: 351); in reality, his readers and followers, whom we now see as the leaders of the international resistance movement against the CCP, are the ones who, enamoured as they are with a particular conception of Western democratic values, are unable to establish their own independent power and program beyond the constraints of another imperial bloc.

The Case of Hong Kong Localism

This deterministic view of ‘Chineseness’ plays right into the CCP’s hands. In a sense, the most extreme anti-CCP dissidents and pro-CCP nationalists share the same intellectual foundation: the belief that genuine political liberation can be won by a struggle over a culturally essentialised understanding of the Chinese political identity and values. For many dissidents, the only politically enlightened mainland Chinese are those closest to disavowing their ‘Chinese’ roots—something that is conflated with adherence to ‘democratic’ values. With this history of cultural debates in mind, we can see the heightened consciousness of the Hongkonger identity as opposed to the Chinese identity in recent years as one logical end of the paradigm championed by the likes of Sun Lungkee. In fact, the pillars of Hong Kong localism—in particular, the prioritisation of Hongkongers’ interests over political solutions that seek to link the democratic struggles of Hongkongers and mainland Chinese people—were defined years before the uprisings of 2014 and 2019.

In 2007, Hong Kong political commentator Joe Chung published the provocative and bestselling *I Don’t Want to Be Chinese in My Next Life* (來生不做中國人)—a book in the polemical tradition of Bo Yang that Sun recommended from its earliest editions. All but calling for political independence for Hong Kong and a rejection of the Chinese identity, this text was reprinted in an extraordinary 55 editions within a decade of its release in Hong Kong (though it has still not been translated into English and is little discussed in scholarly circles). This
was followed in 2011 by Chin Wan’s *On the Hong Kong City-State* (香港城邦論), which postulates that Hong Kong embodies the more authentic and democratic Chinese national character precisely because of its proximity to the West. Chin takes the Greek city-state or polis as an ideal for the city; conveniently and intentionally ignoring the widely inequitable foundations of these city-states, he writes that Hong Kong should be modelled as such, calling for a Western ‘imperial protector’ (Li 2020). Curiously, in the final chapters of his influential text, Sun had also cited the Greek polis as an ideal of freedom that the Chinese intrinsically do not have—pre-empting Chin’s intervention by a few decades.

Of course, Hong Kong’s democracy movement has developed greatly in the decade since Chung and Chin, but in many ways, their theories have deeply transformed and still inform how Hongkongers imagine their own struggle for democracy. Before their demise in the past year or so, mainstream prodemocracy pundits with huge platforms, such as the now-defunct *Apple Daily* (蘋果日報) and various yellow-ribbon online talkshows like those of Lee Yee and Chip Tsao, echoed similar essentialising points about Chinese culture (Barmé 2019). Just in January this year in *Mingpao* (明報), longtime cultural critic Hung Chingtin built on terms similar to those employed by Sun Lungkee to describe the ‘Chinese cultural soul’ (中華文化魂) as ‘deterministic’ (決定性) and fundamentally in contradiction with that of its Western counterpart (Hung 2022). But though Chin has been seen as a key intellectual influence for Hong Kong localism in the years since the Umbrella Movement, the terms of the debate have shifted. Especially with the mass uprisings of 2019 and 2020, the opposition movement in Hong Kong has become infused with more sectors and ideologies than ever before, and it is impossible to predict its future directions in the wake of the unprecedented repression triggered by the enactment of the National Security Law in July 2020. But in a sense, the failure to reckon with the questions posed by the likes of Chung and Chin means the culturalist attacks on Chineseness have not receded, but rather have deepened—to borrow Sun’s language—just like the ‘deep structure’ of the localist opposition’s political horizon. This is not to say whether Hongkongers are more or less friendly or hostile towards mainland Chinese, but the mainstay of the movement has further framed the city’s core political problem in opposition to the Chinese system of governance. The rise of localism, while containing elements that are legitimate responses to increasingly constrained material conditions and economic dispossession, expresses an important symptom of the deleterious effects of years of unchecked cultural criticism of the Chinese national character.

### Today’s Global Stage

Today, anti-CCP diaspora dissidents, powered by the lobbying voices of Chinese, Hongkonger, Tibetan, and Uyghur political exiles, stand on the frontlines of a carefully manufactured foreign policy machine that deliberately blurs the line between the CCP, the Chinese people, and intrinsic Chinese ‘values’. With the repression in Hong Kong and the rise of US–China tensions, the battle against the CCP has rapidly become the centre of foreign policy legislation and debate. Activists see the United States as a defender of democratic values, and Chin’s dream of a rejuvenated Western imperial protectorate for Hong Kong has become an implicit ideological framework for much anti-CCP lobbying: the ‘enlightened’ West must contain the Chinese system of governance. While Hongkongers have largely shunned Chin for his bizarre political theories, the anticommunist diaspora has given practical expression to his core framework perhaps more effectively than Chin could have imagined. ‘Anti-China’ bills, like the *Innovation and Competition Act*, pass through the US Congress with surprising speed, becoming a rare point of bipartisan cooperation. There is little consideration of the catastrophic effects of further empowering the US military and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region with funding of tens of billions of dollars per annum, or whether such a strategy of taking sides is even helpful for those oppressed by Beijing (Chávez 2021).
Tracing the history of these cultural debates reminds us that we must not only take seriously the alliance between the Western imperial establishment and the anticommunist diaspora, but also strive to see how each strand has emerged from a different milieu that ultimately fits hand in glove in this particular moment. While it is tempting to exceptionalise or excuse these diaspora agendas or neatly identify them with those of the Western white nationalist right, it is more effective to carefully contextualise them within the cultural debates from which they emerged. From Sun to Chin, these thinkers undoubtedly pandered to traditional racist, Sinophobic paradigms, but these ideas are expressed and registered through a longstanding debate about the Chinese national character in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

To be clear, excavating and contextualising these culturalist debates do not discount, let alone endorse, the deep-seated kinds of imperialistic and chauvinistic attitudes associated with the Han Chinese identity—effectively mustered by the CCP in recent years for its political ambitions. The key is recognising that such cultural essentialism can only lead to endorsing a ‘clash of civilisations’ discourse that actively impedes us from seeing different frameworks of struggle. Just as Chinese nationalism is no antidote to Western imperialism, aligning with white supremacy in essentialising the Chinese cultural identity as the bogyman responsible for all China’s political problems is no solution either. In his critique of Sun, Au Loong Yu also noted that such essentialism nihilistically treats Chinese people as eternally unable to think beyond authoritarian politics, ironically providing a strong apology for CCP authoritarianism (Lau 1988: 19). Indeed, Chinese blogger Ren Yi, writing under the pseudonym Tu Zhuxi (‘Chairman Rabbit’), wrote a virulently ethnonationalist defense of the Chinese political system in 2020 by relying on the same strategy of cultural essentialisation, writing that ‘from the standpoint of any nationality, for one to deny their own national character is very much unacceptable, no matter if it is Europe, China, or the United States,’ and that ‘denying one’s race, blood, land, and language is to go against one’s own national character, and is hardly acceptable.’

For dissidents, the fight continues to be primarily framed as one against a fundamentally ‘Chinese’ political system, calling for the transfiguration of Chinese society and culture in line with the values of Western ‘democracy’, so trapping us in a political dead-end that misunderstands how democratic change materially functions. In this sense, the nature of Chinese political values comes to stand as the dominant flashpoint of conflict, instead of those systematic injustices that necessitate a rethinking of how battle lines are drawn—for instance, by considering how the CCP draws its power from its investment in and integration into a global neoliberal order that implicates the ruling elites across cultural lines.

What other political strategies arise when we recognise and reject the perspective that essentialised cultural frameworks fundamentally determine the systems of different nation-states? When we can adequately attend to the interconnections between different regimes, we will discover that solidarity across borders between one hegemon and another is no abstract ideal, but a concrete solution against state repression everywhere (Chien and Li 2020). ■

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