

## Defining modern Chinese culture

By the start of the twenty-first century, China's status as a major international economic and political power was beyond dispute. China now manufactures everything from microchips to motor vehicles, and the 'Made in China' label is found in all corners of the world. Along with this economic influence, China's role in global political and cultural affairs is becoming both more significant and increasingly visible. China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics is just one of the more obvious manifestations of this impact. Chinese cultural products, ideas, customs and habits are steadily spreading around the world in the wake of China's economic and political reach. The chapters in this book explore the key domains in Chinese culture and reveal the dynamism produced by a formidable culture's interaction with both its own ancient, albeit never static, traditions and the flood of new global cultural influences. The connection between global economic and political weight and the changes in China's cultural realm are complex and profound. To understand contemporary China – an absolute necessity if one is to understand the world today – it is vital to appreciate the evolution of modern Chinese culture.

Interest in Chinese literature, philosophy, cinema, *qigong* and other cultural artefacts around the world is stronger now than ever before. There has been a plethora of books about Chinese culture published in anglophone countries and a steady increase in students enrolling in courses on Chinese language and civilization. This trend is set to continue. According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, by the beginning of 2007 the number of foreign students studying Chinese had reached 30 million, and is set to rise to 100 million before 2010. The Chinese government is investing considerable financial and human resources in its promotion of Chinese language and culture, best seen in the expansion

of the government-sponsored Confucius Institutes, which since the inauguration of the scheme in 2004 had grown to 145 by April 2007.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, in tandem with this upsurge of interest in ‘things Chinese’, there has also been an assertion of traditional elements, so that Chinese culture is projected as a unifying and largely static phenomenon with contemporary culture reproducing and modernizing relics of China’s historical past. The choice of the title ‘Confucius Institute’ is indicative of this homogenizing and backward-looking trend. The name itself implies a certain kind of Chinese culture that is to be promoted. Confucius’ teaching has for some two thousand years been synonymous with the orthodox aspects of Chinese culture, and in that time it has been a philosophy that gave the appearance of a unitary way of life in the hugely diverse regions of China. Chinese governments have long tended to lean more towards unity than diversity in their pronouncements about China and Chinese culture. Certainly, the current Communist Party (CCP) leaders are investing considerable resources in spreading this particular take on Chinese culture.

While most governments and education systems produce narratives of fixed ‘national cultures’, in fact cultures are in a perpetual state of change; and in the last hundred years the culture of China has changed more fundamentally and rapidly than at any other time in its long past. This is what makes modern Chinese culture such a fascinating subject. Certainly the contributors to this volume regard Chinese culture as dynamic and diverse, and they demonstrate that dynamism and variety in their chapters. They show the continued evolution of Chinese culture in vastly different directions, driven by internal forces that are in constant interaction with influences from outside China’s borders. Indeed, the notion of ‘Chinese culture’ is so unstable that when I began the project of editing this volume, my central problem was to decide precisely what constituted modern Chinese culture. I was presented with the paradox of trying to pinpoint a phenomenon that was in a constant state of flux.

For large parts of the twentieth century, Western thinking on China was dominated by a fascination with her past glories such as Confucian philosophy and Tang poetry, or with Orientalist horrors such as images of Fu Manchu and bound feet. However, in the last few decades, with greater ease of travel in and out of Mainland China, such stereotypes have been largely dismantled and China’s civilization has been increasingly demystified. Current interest focuses upon contemporary trends and is

one of the keys to futurology, as China's vast potential economic power is translated into the reshaping of the world's global political order. Furthermore, academic research on Chinese culture covers topics that span the whole spectrum of society, ranging from the uses of museums of local folk exhibits to major historical ruins such as Yuanmingyuan, the Old Summer Palace which was burned down by British and French troops in 1860. Given the huge variety of manifestations of Chinese culture, the number of potential cultural sites for examination is endless. The sixteen chapters that follow are therefore not exhaustive, but are grouped around significant issues that together aim to give a holistic picture of Chinese culture today. Rather than attempting to be comprehensive, we have worked on the notion of change, so that all contributors show to varying degrees how their subject matter has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Why the focus on the twentieth century? To answer this question, it is perhaps best to outline our understanding of each of the concepts 'modern', 'Chinese' and 'culture'.

### Modern

At first glance, the concept 'modern' should not present many problems since it should really be a matter of definition only. In English, the word 'modern' stems from the Latin '*modo*', which means 'recently' or 'of late'. In the study of European history, however, the 'recent' goes a bit further back. The start of the modern era is generally fixed with reference to the French Revolution of 1789 and/or the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century. 'Modern culture' therefore describes a way of life that is still practised now, but is distinctly different from that before the Industrial Revolution.

In Chinese historical studies, especially in the periodization favoured by the CCP, the term '*jindai*' (literally the near-generation) is often used for 'modern'. However, this is taken to refer to the period between the Sino-British Opium War of 1840–1842, after which relations between China and the West became irrevocably enmeshed, and the May Fourth Movement of 1919, in which new ideas from Japan and the West were imported and re-evaluated against traditional values. In daily speech, the term *xiandai*, which translates as 'the period that has just been revealed', is the most common term for 'modern'. For example, modernization translates as '*xiandaihua*' in Chinese. In historical studies, however, *xiandai* often refers more specifically to the decades between 1919 and 1949,

when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established. And 1949 is then taken to mark the beginning of the contemporary '*dangdai*' (the current-generation) era.<sup>2</sup>

These three historical junctures each have their merits as the point of the start of 'modern China', but each implies a political position that does not necessarily reflect the actual cultural situation in China. If we are to take a periodization that is defined by cultural factors, none of the above is suitable – a different schema is required. I argue that it is most appropriate to place modern Chinese culture as beginning around 1900. While the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century saw the increasing military presence of Western powers in China, culturally, the nation remained largely unchanged. I will not go into detail here, since in the next chapter Peter Zarrow performs an admirable task of providing the historical background to the closing years of the nineteenth century. However, even when the Europeans were dictating the terms of trade after each victorious military encounter with the Chinese, the material and mental landscapes of ordinary people remained largely untouched. The imperial and other mechanisms of governance, such as the civil service examination system, were still in place, and the voices of those advocating system-wide political and social change only became audible towards the end of that century.

Similarly, while the 'May Fourth Movement' around 1919 produced an unprecedented enthusiasm for new ideas, the groundwork had been established in the two preceding decades. While the May Fourth Movement gave rise to extremely important intellectual and political trends in China, including the birth of the Communist Party, the figures who had the most influence on the young at this time were without doubt late nineteenth-century reformists such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, whose writings had converted not only the young emperor of the time, but also the revolutionaries. In fact, Mao Zedong called himself 'Kang Liang' for a time to demonstrate his debt to these late Qing thinkers.

Likewise, the third point often cited as the start of the 'contemporary' era – the establishment of the PRC in 1949 – does not adequately mark the turning point in terms of China's culture. Chinese society had fundamentally changed before 1949, and the CCP's success was a manifestation of this 'modern' transformation rather than the commencement of it. Even though the Communist regime claimed to be making a complete break with traditional thought, its history shows clear continuities with the immediate and distant past. Moreover, even if we assume that

‘modern’ equates to a readiness to engage openly with the world, under CCP rule China has only really actively joined the ‘modern’ world with the advent of Deng Xiaoping’s open-door policy in the early 1980s.

There are compelling reasons for taking 1900 as the starting point of modern Chinese culture. As stated above, at the end of the nineteenth century late Qing reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao were already calling for new ways of thinking and government, and this was also a time when major thought currents such as Social Darwinism were translated into Chinese by figures such as Yan Fu. While they advocated the introduction of Western thought into China, these men were solidly grounded in traditional Chinese learning. This was thus a time when the interaction between Chinese and Western ideas fired the imagination of a whole generation. When the May Fourth radicals vigorously promoted the twin Western saviours – ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Democracy’ – as idols to be emulated by the young, this was done as a deliberate elevation of the Western cultural norms that were to replace Chinese standards and values. Likewise, the CCP also intended to wipe out all vestiges of feudal China, which were to be replaced by Marxism, another Western import. Nonetheless, whatever time frame we adopt to limit the scope of ‘modern Chinese culture’, the term still implies something that is based on something ‘Chinese’. Indeed, whatever system is adopted, China continued to be ‘Chinese’, and despite the increasing modernization in the twentieth century, many core traditions continued to characterize the landscape. Indeed, had Kang Youwei succeeded in 1898 in his bid to introduce his form of ‘original’ Confucianism nationally, the new millennium might have seen a Great Commonwealth founded on a Confucian renaissance, similar to the modernization programme of the Meiji Restoration in Japan. Even though the so-called 100 Days Reform of 1898 did not succeed, it did mark the beginnings of ‘modern’ (with hints of Western) modes of both thinking and behaving while remaining Chinese.

In addition, in the years immediately before and after 1900, there was also a deliberate attempt to evaluate Chinese civilization holistically and from a perspective that many intellectuals of the time explicitly considered ‘modern’. In the last few years of the nineteenth century, reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao took a comprehensive and radical look at Chinese culture in the hope that it could be integrated productively into the world. At the same time, it was only at the start of the twentieth century that thinkers began to be concerned about defining a national identity. As Prasenjit Duara deftly shows in Chapter 3, ideas

of nation and Chinese identity were ferociously advocated and debated throughout the century.

While I have stressed the importance of Chinese–Western interaction as one aspect of the advent of the modern period in China, Westernization does not automatically produce modernity. In many ways, the modern age became more ‘Chinese’, in the sense that people living in Chinese communities became more nationalistic and at times more inward looking. Thus, ironically, the ‘internationalism’ of the twentieth century created a self-conscious and sometimes fiercely expressed nationalism in China – from the xenophobic Boxers of 1900 right up to the pathologically Sinocentric radicals of the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s and the ‘China Can Say “No”’ crowd of the late 1990s. There were times when the Centre could barely hold, such as the warlord period of the 1920s, and times when central control was strictly enforced, as seen in the early Communist period.

In this volume I have resisted the commonplace custom of dividing the twentieth century into ‘modern’ (Republican) and ‘contemporary’ (Communist). While the Nationalist–Communist divide can serve as a convenient means of viewing the major political juncture of the twentieth century, in cultural terms the complexities of both eras contain elements that are more than just Imperial, Nationalist or Communist. Indeed, these descriptors are often confusing or downright misleading. Modern Chinese culture, as I have argued above, included elements from the imperial era. Similarly, some of the most interesting ideas and practices of the Communist experiment came from the 1930s and 1940s. And the PRC has seen so many changes and diverse practices that it too cannot be easily slotted into one homogeneous ‘culture’. As Arif Dirlik demonstrates in Chapter 8, the theorizing of, and commentaries upon, socialism in China have undergone tremendous changes in the twentieth century, and not always because of utilitarian imperatives of nation-building.

Taking the twentieth century and beyond as the modern frame has other interesting implications. The extraordinary developments in the Chinese world – indeed in the world in general – over the last few decades have meant that the new millennium has already witnessed a Chinese culture that was unimaginable only a few generations ago. The speed with which even the physical landscape is changing is equalled only by the psychological transformations that many have had to undergo. This is especially true of the last decade. Liu Kang’s chapter on the

phenomenal developments in television and the Internet illustrates the degree to which cyber culture has penetrated and transformed the lives of ordinary Chinese, particularly the urban young. The frequent claims of a spiritual vacuum by political leaders and public intellectuals are a reminder that there is indeed a crisis of recognition. The unrelenting and drastic transformations, both physical and mental, have left many reeling from a state of future shock.

Not only has Mainland China changed; its peripheries such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau are becoming even more varied. Voices advocating an independent identity are heard from the former, while the latter have become more integrated and interdependent with the Mainland. The diasporic communities have also transformed beyond recognition. What were mainly groups from coastal regions of Guangdong and Fujian are now joined by people from the interior, speaking dialects that the old communities would not have understood. More importantly, the 'cultural level' – to be defined more precisely in the section on 'culture' – of the new diaspora is very different from that of the old. But of course there are many things happening now that are still 'traditional' and 'modern', and this book in capturing the twentieth century as modern does occasionally hark back to 'traditional' times, as well as what is happening in the twenty-first century, to explain 'modern' China.

### **Chinese**

While defining the term 'modern' presents problems, the concept of 'Chinese' is even more difficult to pin down. In English, the word 'China' seems to have derived from the Qin (pronounced 'chin') Dynasty (221–206 BC), the first Chinese dynasty in which the various states that had previously existed were unified as one Chinese empire. This was also the period during which indirect contacts were made between the Chinese and Roman empires by way of the silk route. In Chinese, 'China' (Zhongguo) literally means the Middle Kingdom (or centring nation, if the idea of the emperor or capital city being a magnetic centre is accepted), giving rise to Sino-centric sentiments among many Chinese. Of course, over the centuries, the 'centre' of the country shifted, most often along the Yellow River in the north or the Yangtze River in the south. Nevertheless, for millennia, the Chinese empire referred to the geographical area covering regions around these two rivers. Within this area, myriad and dissimilar groups of peoples, languages and ways of life existed and continue

to exist. Yet these groups all describe themselves as Chinese, in the same way that the large variety of peoples and entities in Europe call themselves European. To make matters even more complicated, just as 'European' can describe cultures that are outside Europe, so too is 'Chinese' an adjective that can travel the globe. Nonetheless, its origins stem from the Chinese empire.

The contributors to this volume are cognizant of the fact that 'Chinese' contains remnants of imperial times when 'China' was not only the centre of the world, but also 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), a term that indicated the traditional Chinese view of the world: that the Chinese civilization was all there was in the universe. However, we are more concerned here with analysing current perceptions and realities. Mostly, we describe people and things in the People's Republic of China (PRC). We are also keenly aware that as well as qualifying people and things in China, the term 'Chinese' can also describe people of the 'national minorities' and the Chinese diaspora, scattered around the world, and ideas and things that may or may not have come out of China. The 'national minorities' aside, the diversity of Chinese ethnicities sets the scene for discarding the notion of an essential and fixed Chineseness. Debates about what it means to be Chinese have raged for decades. They continue right into the present time, and will no doubt intensify as the PRC and Taiwanese leaderships believe that it is more advantageous to govern a people with a more unified identity. However, as William Jankowiak shows in Chapter 5, while the Chinese state would like its people to be more culturally centric and converge towards some Confucian norm, in reality, even the Han Chinese are composed of people with variant languages and habits. The notion of ethnic, and therefore 'minority', identity is a fluid and contested one. Thus, again, 'change' provides the key to our discussions.

Often, people's self-perceptions are transformed by social forces beyond their control. However, there are times when they actively want to adopt a different persona, for example by assuming the customs and appearances of foreign cultures. A recent article from the *Washington Post* about new housing developments in China entitled 'Developers Build Ersatz European, American Communities for the New Middle Class' articulates this phenomenon graphically:

The ding-dong from the neo-Gothic church next door signals to Wu Yuqing that it's time to wake up. On her way to the grocery store each day, she walks past the Cob Gate Fish & Chip shop and bronze statues of Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale and



William Shakespeare. Tall men decked out in the red uniforms of the Queen's Guard nod hello.

The place looks a lot like a small town on the Thames River, but Wu's new home is actually in a suburb of Shanghai...

Shanghai's plan is ... [to build] ... a ring of satellite developments modeled after different parts of Europe, including German, Czech, Spanish and Scandinavian districts, in addition to the one that looks like London, known as Thames Town.<sup>3</sup>

The writer of this article calls these new townships 'ersatz', casting doubt on the authenticity not only of the buildings, but by implication of the cultural affectations of the residents. The article makes quite plain that the residents of these townships do not know anything about the European cultures that they aspire towards. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to ask: are these townships Chinese or European? Clearly, the article suggests they are Chinese, or fake Western as best. The word *ersatz* implies that. Suppose these townships were full of pale Englishmen, blonde Germans etc, living as they did in the old foreign concessions in Shanghai? Would they be considered European or still Chinese? That is to say, would these townships then be part of European or Chinese culture? What we are asking here is: does it matter if a place that is situated in China looks European or American and wants to imitate those lifestyles? Are they then Western? Or do they need white people living in them to be Western?

All the above questions can be asked with different referents. When is Chinese culture Chinese? In Mainland China? What about Hong Kong or Taiwan? Or, if we take the question even further, what about Chinatowns in the West? There, we have had for nearly a hundred years many districts that are called Chinatowns. These so-called Chinatowns are usually populated by Chinese shops, restaurants, and more importantly ethnic Chinese.

It is true that many older Chinese living in foreign countries believe that even though they live in the West – some having done so for generations – they are more knowledgeable about Chinese culture than those back in China. Of course, as Wang Gungwu shows in Chapter 6, there is a great variety of self-identities among the diasporic Chinese communities, and these identities also change over time, sometimes because of the environment in the host country, but more often because of the changing political situation in China itself. In addition, the claim by diasporic communities that they preserve the authentic home culture

while those back in the homeland have lost it is common not just among Chinese, but also among other migrant communities. For example, many young migrant women experience considerable conflict with older generations in their families who complain that the young have lost the moral codes of their home countries. In immigrant countries such as Australia, this migrant syndrome was once quite common among Greeks and Italians, until the older generation realized that their homelands had changed and had left them behind.

The idea of Chinatown has always said more about an imagined Chinese culture of the non-Chinese in the host countries than about the actual cultures in the Chinatowns. For example, Barrio Chino in Barcelona is an area in the inner city that was once the red light district, and was seen to be an area of sex, drugs and crime. They called it Barrio Chino because presumably the Chinese were thought to indulge in sex, drugs and crime. Such an Orientalist use of Chinese culture was also highly evident in Polanski's movie *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. As in Barcelona's Barrio Chino, the Chinese are almost invisible in the movie *Chinatown*: the title only makes sense if we agree that anything associated with even the name Chinese must be imbued with immorality, homicide and inscrutability.

Of course, not all imagined Chinese cultures are evil and corrupt. The Chinatown in the Australian aboriginal township of Cherbourg is also an imagined space, and no Chinese person has ever lived there, but it seems that those who lay claim to it do so because one of the women in generations past might have married a Chinese, and one influential female elder in particular decided that they would define themselves against the other inhabitants by holding on to this Chinese heritage, whether it was real or not. This was one way to counter the oppressive white domination that these communities suffered.<sup>4</sup> It can be argued that this Chinatown has as much to do with Chinese culture as that in Polanski's film *Chinatown*, but can we therefore erase the 'Chinese' qualifier in the term? Obviously, we can only answer in the affirmative if we are perfectly clear what 'Chinese' means and deny all others the right to claim some idea or thing as Chinese. Failing this, 'Chinese' becomes just about anything that we want to make it.

Nonetheless, some of the best minds in China in the last hundred years or so have been trying to devise ways of distilling what they consider to be the essence of 'Chinese culture' so that its good bits can be inherited and its rotten bits discarded. In the early twentieth century, for example,

thinkers like Zhang Binglin, Liu Shipei and those of the 'National Essence' School tried hard to recover the best of Chinese culture. Even in the most radical phases of Communist rule, some of the most intense controversies among intellectuals have been concerned with ways of defining the essence of Chinese culture, and when that is done, preserving it. The most notable method devised for salvaging Chinese culture was proposed by Feng Youlan, whose 'abstract inheritance method' basically stated that, despite the fact that the 'feudal dross' of Confucianism should be repudiated and trashed, the essential goodness of Confucian humanism should be inherited in an abstract way so that the transition to a new Socialist society would not be too abrupt and the fine values of Chinese culture would not be forgotten.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not only in relation to popular culture such as cooking and dating behaviour that arguments are put forward to ensure that 'Chinese culture' is continued. Similar claims have been made even in the most abstract realms.

Outside the Mainland, these debates have been revived with a vengeance since China became more open to the outside world in the 1980s, with the revival of the so-called 'New Confucian' school of thought. This 'school' was begun by philosophers such as Liang Shuming and Xiong Shili who even before 1949 had argued for the revival of Confucianism in China. Their versions of Confucianism were heavily diluted by Buddhist elements, so much so that Liang has been described as 'the last Buddhist' as well as the 'last Confucian'.<sup>6</sup> While Liang and Xiong are now said to be the fathers of the New Confucianism school, their conservative ideas simply had no way of gaining acceptance in the Mainland after 1949. Their message that Confucianism or Chinese tradition held the key to a correct way to live in the modern world continued to be advocated by those who left China and lived in Hong Kong and Taiwan in particular. In Chapter 7, Sor-hoon Tan describes the ways in which the 'new' Confucian thought developed during the twentieth century.

On the Mainland itself, the so-called New Confucians were mostly ignored for some thirty years after China became Communist. It was only after the 'Asian Economic Miracle' and the opening up of China's economy after the 1980s that Confucianism came back into vogue. A relatively obscure document titled 'Declaration on Behalf of Chinese Culture Respectfully Announced to the People of the World', which had been published in 1958, was resuscitated as the beginnings of the formation of a new school of thought. The 1958 document was penned by four of the most vocal writers outside China known for their regular

'defence' of what they perceived to be the 'glories of traditional Chinese culture': Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, Zhang Junmai and Tang Junyi. In fact, this document is not a systematic outline of any one philosophy as such; rather, it is an attempt by those who felt strongly about traditional Chinese philosophy to integrate it with a perceived modern and world culture.

As scholars who had fled China, the authors of the Declaration considered that China under Communism had lost its cultural heritage. Naturally, these writers were all but ignored in China. However, in the last twenty or so years, the Mainland's attitude towards traditional Chinese culture has changed dramatically. 'New Confucianism' gained popularity there and renowned philosophers who were considered New Confucianists were invited to lecture at Peking University and other prestigious institutions. One of these visiting scholars was Tu Wei-ming, a professor from Harvard University. Tu Wei-ming's most influential thesis concerning Chinese culture is succinctly summed up in his seminal essay: 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center'.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the question of who has possession of Chinese culture has become of great interest to the tens of millions of ethnic Chinese who live outside China today. There is something incongruous about the claim that the practitioners of 'real' Chinese culture live not inside China, but abroad, especially at the apex of American thinking, Harvard. Nonetheless, the point has been made and made quite persuasively.

In refusing to recognize the changes in China that were taking place around them, the New Confucians before 1949 could be said to have been in a state of denial. The New Culture Movement in the early decades of the twentieth century had all but made Confucianism the antithesis of modernity. The Communist regime continued on the anti-Confucian path throughout the 1950s and 1960s, so that by the Cultural Revolution decade all 'old things' were vehemently attacked. Most interestingly, the Gang of Four during the anti-Confucius campaign of 1974 wanted to revive Legalism to replace Confucianism. Instead of wanting to be 'modern', they salvaged what they claimed to be indigenous Chinese in the philosophy of ancient thinkers such as the Legalists Xunzi and Hanfei. These classical philosophers were, as the Gang of Four rightly pointed out, at least indigenous Chinese. What the radicals did not emphasize was that Legalism was in fact an offshoot of Confucianism, and that the utilitarian Mozi and his followers were much more hostile to the Confucians, making Moism an indigenous system that was philosophically

much more an antithesis to Confucianism than Legalism could claim to be. Nonetheless, casting aside the politics of the interpretations, and the harshness of some aspects of Legalism, surely Legalism or the pragmatic Moism would be a better route to an amalgam of Chinese and Western essences than the deceptive notions of 'benevolent' Confucian management techniques that are being propagated now? This is deceptive because Confucius and past Confucian orthodoxy denigrated commerce, but the New Confucians seem quite happy to accommodate the 'modern' Confucius as a business consultant. Even more heretically, the self-proclaimed hedonist Yu Dan interprets the Confucian *Analects* as a text on how to live a good life in the modern world. The populace, hungry for spiritual sustenance that is both 'Chinese' and hip, eagerly buy into this rendition, thereby making Yu Dan a new-style academic celebrity.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps, in parallel to the term 'postmodern' that is now bandied about in parts of the world, we have a post-Chinese Chinese culture. It would be a political nonsense to talk about post-China. But in terms of culture, using post-Chinese as a possessive adjective makes good sense. This postmodern post-Chinese idea is often expressed as trans-national Chineseness. In fact, in discussions of arthouse Chinese films, the trans-national usage is standard. There have been few films since the Fifth Generation movie directors that could be truly said to be purely Chinese, since most are global productions. And the competition is also for international prizes. Chris Berry in Chapter 15 traces the film industry from its beginnings as a Western import early last century to its emergence as a global phenomenon; interestingly, he also demonstrates that with the emergence of the Sixth Generation directors, the industry has fragmented within China itself. As with every other aspect of Chinese culture, the filmic form is in a state of flux. The same is true for other art forms such as music and painting. Colin Mackerras in Chapter 13 and David Clarke in Chapter 14 show how the performing and visual arts have undergone dramatic changes due to the interplay of native traditions and traditions from without, including European and Soviet theories and practices. The result of all this intermingling tells much about the globalization of culture, and these chapters on sight and sound are excellent demonstrations of this process.

In China at present, classical European music is probably as popular and performed as frequently as it is in any country in Europe. The degree to which artistic pursuits that are considered 'modern' (and often Western) are nurtured ensures that whatever is produced or admired there

are fusions of many different styles, often with elements from ethnic Chinese artists working abroad as well. In the same way, Chinese literature in the twentieth century went through so many transformations due to influences from the outside world that to talk about a Chinese literature needs many qualifications. Thus, the history of modern Chinese literature that I co-authored is awkwardly titled *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* rather than simply ‘Modern Chinese Literature’ to delimit it temporally and spatially and distinguish it from all other literatures that are written in the Chinese language or are Chinese in content.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Chinese literature, even when it refers to that written in Mainland China, has numerous strands, and here again, change is the defining feature, as Charles Laughlin and Michel Hockx show in their chapters (Chapters 11 and 12) on the complexities of the noisy revolutionary and inward-looking involutory literary traditions. If we consider the literature by Chinese diasporic writers about life in foreign lands in non-Chinese languages as part of the Chinese literary scene, the notion of post-Chinese is even more irresistible.

### Culture

The word ‘culture’ is, in different ways, as complicated as ‘Chinese’. In Chinese, the term ‘culture’ (*wenhua*) literally implies a process of transformation by *wen*, or writing. Thus ‘culture’ invokes writing. *Wen* originally came from the scratches made on ancient divination objects such as bones and tortoise shells, and was therefore a human attempt to reveal thought patterns in concrete form. It was also the precursor to writing, with its function of communicating and categorizing the universe. Certainly, it captures the idea of people in the priestly or writing classes making sense of the world. Traditionally, as Zong-qi Cai observes, *wen* denotes many things, including ‘royal posthumous titles, ritual objects, rites and music, norms and statutes; dignified deportment, the polite arts, graphic cosmic symbols, eloquent speech, writing, rhymed writing, and belles-lettres’.<sup>10</sup> In short, *wen* denotes lofty symbols and writing. It still has these connotations today. Colloquially, to say that somebody has culture (*you wenhua*) means that they have an education and can write. The verbalizing particle *hua* in *wenhua* thus indicates the transformative effect of culture. Through cultivation, *wenhua* in theory can be achieved by all who aspire to it so that, through it, a cultured person is changed.

While change is implicit in the notion of *wenhua*, the change, or improvement, that it engenders has always been intimately linked to that which is mostly transcribed, including language, literature, religion and philosophy. In Chinese, more than in most other languages, the writing system was the site of intense struggles throughout the twentieth century. This is not surprising, since having writing skills is the prerequisite to having culture in the ordinary understanding of the word ‘culture’, since ‘*wen*’, or writing, is literally part of the meaning of culture. As Ping Chen shows in Chapter 10, the struggle waged around the writing system is not just linguistic, but highly political. Difficulty in mastering language leads to debates about simplifying it, so that it is made more available to more people. Coupled with simplification, the more radical proposal argues for the advantages of Romanization and Pinyin, so that the memorization of thousands of characters is rendered unnecessary. While computers and the Internet have to a certain extent democratized the written language, ‘culture’ in Chinese retains its connotations of ‘high culture’.

In the anglophone world, the notion of a ‘high culture’ is perhaps best expressed by Matthew Arnold (1822–88), who claimed that to have culture is to ‘know the best that has been said and thought in the world’.<sup>11</sup> This elitist position is concise, but not very precise. To start with, what is best is not fixed and is thus highly contentious. More importantly, it was promoted at a time of empire, when Britannia ruled the waves. So, presumably, the best came out of Britain, and Arnold did not hesitate to proclaim this belief. By contrast, China in the nineteenth century was experiencing some of the worst moments in its history. Chinese culture then would not have been something that many people would have considered to be the best. More likely, in England, in the pursuit of truth and beauty, most would have chosen the Keatsian fancies of classical Greece.

While the colonial age in the nineteenth century gave the impression that European culture represented the most advanced form of civilization, the two World Wars shook the complacency of many Europeans. Those wars in concert with the anti-colonialist movements that followed helped lead to changes in attitudes towards culture. In the second half of the century, academia in the West began to argue for less lofty ideas and manifestations of human society, best exemplified by Raymond Williams’ 1958 essay ‘Culture is Ordinary’.<sup>12</sup> Such sentiments had a counterpart in China. The Maoist emphasis on creating a popular/peasant culture that ‘served the people’ was to have a lasting impact on how *wenhua* is understood. In both the West and China, the closing decades of

the twentieth century were a time when 'Cultural Studies' began to take hold in universities, and, as well as 'subaltern' cultural items, non-written everyday objects such as cinema, television, kungfu and sex became prime areas of research into 'culture'. Thus, despite the fact that academics were getting involved in this new understanding of culture, '*wenhua*' was becoming less refined and elevated and more mass-based. More importantly, *wenhua* no longer needed to be based on *wen*, or the written.

But while this conception of culture is more democratic, it is also more anarchic. What is not culture? How individualistic can one go? When do I know that 'my culture' is the same as 'our culture'? This question is especially important for migrant societies such as Australia. In an age of globalization, it has also become increasingly important for other countries, including China. Thus, in the late twentieth century, the decline of the canons also brought consequences of uncertainty in literary and artistic fields. For rapidly developing countries such as China in particular, 'culture' is often appropriated by politicians and educationalists, who advocate maintaining and perpetuating culture as a social cohesive, and using it to stabilize societies through a process of mutual recognition of shared values.

Treating culture as synonymous with sets of meanings that distinguish groups from each other helps to create in-groups and out-groups. As such, it was effectively harnessed throughout twentieth-century China to further nationalist goals. Chinese culture has drifted away from its original meaning of *wenhua* as an elevated text-based phenomenon based in China, to one which can be used by people who reside not just on the Chinese Mainland but throughout the world. Even so, the claim to some sort of superior essence is still quite pronounced, so that my culture is somehow *wenhua* while your (referring to anyone who is not 'Chinese') culture can be seen as barbaric.

*Wen* refers not just to literary or cultural accomplishments. The fundamental utility of '*wen*' rests on its reference to power. Having *wen* in the past referred to those who had passed the civil service examinations. Thus, the *wenren*, or the scholar-gentry, which in China has reproduced itself through the civil service examination system for centuries, was clearly the controlling class. Even now, '*you wenhua*' generally refers to those who have finished a certain amount of formal education, normally senior secondary school. They usually have steady jobs and a regular income, such as teachers or bureaucrats who perpetuate social norms. These social norms, of course, were the traditionally Confucian 'culture'



that in the twentieth century were becoming much more unstable and in flux. Traditionally, the *wenren* could only be men, since men were the only people allowed to sit for the civil service examinations that enabled them to become 'cultured'. However, in the twentieth century, gender boundaries were progressively being transformed, and Harriet Evans' discussion in Chapter 4 details the many intricacies associated with the breaking down of such boundaries.

In fact, the twentieth century, in our terms the period of modern Chinese culture, shows that this culture has become the site of intense struggle, with everyone claiming ownership of it, and in the process changing its meaning and content. Of course, there has been widespread agreement that Chinese culture has certain essential general ingredients, and both Feng Youlan's 'abstract inheritance method' effort and those of the New Confucians were attempts to salvage the 'abstract' and 'general' elements of this culture. Unfortunately, when they say 'Chinese culture', these theoreticians often imply more 'elevated' and conservative values. The argument for some essential Chineseness that rests on Chinese culture parallels the 'Asian values' debate that was fashionable in the 1980s and 1990s. Ultimately this was about eulogizing conventional practices such as treasuring family ties, respecting the old, valuing formal education and honouring hard work – practices that are found in most societies. Thus, no matter how we interpret modern Chinese culture, the only safe statement we can make about it is that it is vague and forever changing. Furthermore, the globalization process as a catalyst for change has not slowed down in the new millennium, but has become more intense than ever before. This will mean that Chinese culture will transform even more quickly as time progresses, and trying to stabilize its 'essence' for preservation will become more difficult. Its 'essence' has in fact become an ingredient for new fusions of different cultures.

This is not to say that local communities and cultures do not define individuals. Indeed, Daniel Overmyer in Chapter 9 emphasizes the overriding importance of local traditions of ritual and belief as the major form of Chinese religion. In many respects, these local cultures have long been the foundation of what it means to be Chinese for the majority of the population. When asked where they are from, people generally respond by naming their ancestral community, and, by implication, all the traditions it represents. Notwithstanding this important qualification, Overmyer does provide an overview of the beliefs and rituals of the major

religions such as Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in China, showing how they have been interacting and influencing life in China for millennia, and that in the twentieth century these interactions have become even more intense. The move towards globalization means that Chinese culture is something that is evolving almost in the way that was aptly summarized by Tan Sitong, who in 1896 attempted to integrate Confucianism, Christianity and Buddhism. Tan Sitong was executed two years later for his political activism in the promotion of heterodoxy, but when he proclaimed that ‘the founders of the three religions [Christianity, Confucianism and Buddhism] are all one. When I worship one, I worship them all’,<sup>13</sup> he was already one step ahead of those such as the New Confucianist Liang Shuming and the Communist radical Chen Duxiu who fiercely argued about the merits of Eastern and Western cultures a couple of decades later.

Ultimately, Chinese culture should describe how the Chinese people live and play as well as how they think. *Wenhua* is more than *wen*. In their play, the Chinese have also been keen to be part of the world community, and not just part of, but to lead in this arena as well. The time and effort invested in hosting the Olympic Games is but the most conspicuous example of this. As Susan Brownell shows in Chapter 17, this event is the culmination of decades of China’s endeavours to be recognized as a world leader by other countries. The wish to achieve leadership status is not confined to the sporting arena, though it is of paramount importance in terms of China’s international relations. Other aspects of Chinese physical culture such as martial arts are also gaining popularity abroad. Meanwhile, within China, Western forms of physical activity such as ballroom dancing are promoted as a means to physical and mental health.

Of course, sport is but one dimension of Chinese culture that has changed and is changing. Every other aspect of Chinese culture is also undergoing dramatic transformations. Furthermore, every other aspect of Chinese culture is becoming globalized. By taking the end of the nineteenth century as the beginning of modern culture and the whole of the twentieth century as the time frame that we have defined as modern China in terms of culture, therefore, the book should neatly bring the end back to the beginning, when the biggest concern was how to be both Chinese and a citizen of the world. In fact, now the case for taking all thoughts and practices as ‘Chinese cultures’ is even more pertinent, as we have truly multi-cultural cultural forms such as films and the Internet that bind the world even more closely together. For these forms

are literally created trans-culturally, producing outcomes that are recognizably Chinese but also global.

### Notes

1. Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, 10 April 2007, [www.china.org.cn/english/photo/206586.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/english/photo/206586.htm)
2. I should note here that while defining and thinking about one's relationship to 'modernity' has emerged as a topic of debate in both the West and China, my concern in this chapter is on periodization, and issues of modernity will be taken up in later chapters where relevant. Furthermore, in the West, much attention was focused on the question of postmodernity in the 1980s – and this proved to be of intense interest to Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s. While it is tempting to categorize China in the new millennium as postmodern, these concepts are far too complex to coherently incorporate into this short chapter.
3. Ariana Eunjung Cha, 'West Rises in China's Back Yard: Developers Build Ersatz European, American Communities for New Middle Class', *Washington Post*, 11 April 2007.
4. See discussion in Guy Ramsay, 'Cherbourg's Chinatown: Creating an Identity of Place on an Australian Aboriginal Settlement', *Journal of Historical Geography* 29, no. 1, 2003, pp. 109–22.
5. See discussion in Kam Louie, *Inheriting Tradition: Critiques of the Classical Philosophers in Communist China 1949–1966*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1986.
6. John J. Hanafin, 'The "Last Buddhist": The Philosophy of Liang Shuming', in John Makeham (ed.), *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, pp. 187–218. Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979.
7. Tu Wei-ming, 'Cultural China: The Periphery as the Center', *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 120, no. 2, 1991, pp. 1–32.
8. See report in Ting Shi, 'Making History Hip', *South China Morning Post*, 10 August 2007, p. A14.
9. Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.
10. Zong-qi Cai, 'Wen and the Construction of a Critical System in "Wensin Diaolong"', *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 22, 2000, p. 1.
11. Matthew Arnold, *Literature & Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*, Cambridge, Chadwyck-Healey, 1999, p. xxxiii.
12. Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in John Higgins (ed.), *The Raymond Williams Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, pp. 11–24.
13. Cited in Kam Louie, *Critiques of Confucius in Contemporary China*, Hong Kong, Chinese University Press, 1980, p. 3.