

1 The Study of Chinese Culture in American Classrooms

Ban Wang, Stanford University

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses an individualistic approach to the study of Chinese culture in American academia. Drawing on personal experience and insights by Alasdair MacIntyre and Alan Bloom about culture as embedded in national history and community, I critique the self-centered approach to learning about China under the rubric of emotivism in American classroom learning. Trapped in the emotivist frame of mind, students approach Chinese culture as a consumer good, as an aesthetic object for egoistic entertainment, as a market for career and self-fulfillment, or as a particularity to be assimilated into the universal narrative of modernity. Mortgaged to an instrumental rationality since the Enlightenment, the emotivist learner, though fascinated by exotic cultural elements, privileges self-pleasure and preferences above the validity and integrity of the other. This mindset reflects a superficial cosmopolitanism that picks and chooses diverse, colorful images from the world for self-enjoyment. But in times of crisis and trauma, the superficial cosmopolitanism retreats to the national home ground, elevating national identity and belonging above other cultures. I argue that these stances fail to take Chinese culture and history seriously. They see Chinese people and their trajectory only as a means, not as an end. The Chinese are not recognized as full-fledged human subjects in this cross-cultural exchange.

KEYWORDS

cultural narcissism, emotivism, images of China, American classroom, self-centeredness, cosmopolitanism

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom diagnoses a structure of feeling among American students under the rubric “self-centeredness.” College students, Bloom writes, are preoccupied with their relationships, sexuality, and career prospects, and “the affairs of daily life rarely involve concern for a larger community in such a way as to make public and private merge in one’s thought” (Bloom 1988, p. 84). They feel released from the constraints of the nation, religion, politics, and ideas of civilization, which to them were tragic events and bloody upheavals in the past or in the third world. Although they were born and bred in America, they experience American culture “not as a common project but as a framework within which people are only individuals, where they are left alone” (Bloom, 1988, p. 85). Dropping all cultural heritage,

history, and memory, they learn culture only for the sake of its market value, and in their goals for learning, they orient themselves toward seeking personal fulfillment, success, and status in society. Underlying this mentality is a notion of culture and society defined by individualistic pursuit and freedom. This utilitarian notion of culture regresses to a state of nature and to a stripped-down, atomistic personality denuded of national and social concerns. (Wang Ban, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/how-not-teach-china-america>.)

The self-centeredness bears on how students approach foreign countries and cultures. In the study of Chinese culture, this attitude distorts a balanced and historical image of China. When a student turns his or her gaze to other cultural traditions, the individual often assumes a bland egalitarianism that permits anything as long as unfamiliar traditions do not offend his taste or infringe on the individual's rights. At home, the individual feels that he encapsulates an identity detached from the deep background of his own culture and history, while abroad, he can look at a foreign country as little more than a place to project personal preferences and a venue for self-expression. Years of teaching in American universities tells me that Bloom's 1988 description of cultural narcissism is still as relevant today, if not more so, but this feature has taken on the paradoxical guises of individualism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. These mindsets seem to be signs of close-mindedness in the study of Chinese culture.

This self-absorption shuts students out from geopolitical events of the day and separates them from the ongoing drama, narratives, and traumas that grip the attention of scholars in Chinese studies. (Wang Ban, <https://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/how-not-teach-china-america>) Scholars in Chinese studies approach China not only as a personal career choice, but also as concerned "citizens" worrying about Chinese situations and problems, but the awareness of China as a nation with a long history and culture seems absent in American students. If the study of Chinese culture is not a labor of love, it is often an object of utilitarian value. China can be gazed at with pleasure and its knowledge can be an advantage for developing an overseas career in the global market. This mindset about foreign cultures reflects a deeper moral problem that Alasdair MacIntyre designated as the emotivist self (1984). Cutting oneself off from culture, community, history, and moral evaluation, the emotivist self represents a moral trait that dates to the Enlightenment. Accepted as the moral basis for the secular, atomistic self in modern discourse, the emotivist mindset develops by progressively dropping off the inherited ethical elements rooted in collective history and cultural tradition.

The emotivist self bears directly on the moral attitude toward other people and culture. A doctrine that treats all judgments, and especially moral judgments as nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, emotivism removes the question of good or bad, of truth and falsehood from moral debate. Being little more than the preferences and feelings of the individual with a right to his opinion, moral judgments are neither true nor false. Consensus on moral judgment "is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 12). The moral question is thus turned into a theatrical or aesthetic performance, a strategy of producing a compelling effect. The one who can marshal the techniques and deploy manipulative rhetoric will prevail over the other.

In the context of social interaction, emotivism obliterates any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative relations. Drawing on Kant, MacIntyre reminds us that for modern discourse, a human relationship devoid of morality drastically differs from one informed by classical assumptions of moral rationality and sympathy. The relation without moral reciprocity is one in which "each person treats the other primarily a means to his or her ends." The moral relation, on the other hand, is one in which "each treats other as an end" (p. 24). To treat someone as an end is to treat him or her as a sovereign subject equipped with reason and discretion—as a cultural agent endowed with autonomy who is able to judge and decide. For example, in conversation I may offer a number of reasons to demonstrate what is good, but I should refrain from influencing my audience except by reasons which he or she judges to be good. This mode of communication is moral and rational in the Kantian sense, because it appeals to a common, inter-subjective, and sharable ground. The common ground is not dictated by you and me alone, but is attainable through reasoned discourse and dialogue. Further, treating a

person as an end implies mutual respect for the integrity and dignity of all persons who are party to a discussion. “By contrast, to treat someone else as a means is to seek to make him or her an instrument of my purposes by adducing whatever influences or considerations will in fact be effective on this or that occasions” (MacIntyre, p. 24).

MacIntyre describes three archetypal modern personalities marked by emotivism. They are the aesthete, therapist, and manager. In Henry James’ novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, rich aesthetes in European villas preoccupy themselves with finding thrills and warding off boredom. They get their daily diet of amusement by “contriving behavior in others that will be responsive to their wishes, that will feed their sated appetite” (p. 24). This is a case of an individual treating another as a consumer item: one can be a consumer of persons or conversely, a person being consumed. The therapist also treats the end as given and is interested only in bringing maladjusted individuals to normal, functional ones. Modern business is also a form of emotivism, in treating economic activity as a means of accumulating capital while disregarding the general wellbeing of community and society. The end of social progress and wellbeing is reduced to the goal of profit making and private wealth. As a player in the modern business milieu, the manager imposes his arbitrary power on employees rather than abiding by accepted authority. He is not concerned with the end, but only with the means, the technique and tactics used to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in a business. What counts is the performative effectiveness and productivity of the organization, not its purpose. All these figures have in common is that they do not engage in moral conversation about what purposes human action serves. They do not suppose that their action and influence have any moral content that can be discussed in public discourse in terms of good and bad. Public discourse about issues of social concern has been degraded to little more than a private means of expression and an arbitration of personal choice—utterance of irreconcilable and clashing personal wills.

What does this emotive stance have to do with the study of China and foreign cultures outside the United States? The maxim “to treat someone as an end” could be extended to “treating a nation or country as an end.” This means to treat each nation and its people as the master of their own fate and to respect their culture, history, and national development, not as a tool for achieving my private purposes and on behalf of my nation’s interest. In the world system of nation-states, the most powerful countries often fail to live up to this measure. Trapped in the emotivist self, a student dealing with China may also assume the three roles of aesthete, manager, and therapist. He may treat China as a consumer item, as if he were dating a pretty Chinese girl for a few days. He may act like a connoisseur of national geographical exotica or Eastern beauty to satisfy his orientalist curiosity. In an instrumental frame of mind, he may exercise managerial rationality, judging China in terms of its efficiency in conforming to the world economy and capital expansion. The questions of China’s own approach to socio-political development and its nationally regulated economy are not the concern of this managerial rationality. In the third role, students may treat China in the capacity of a therapist, believing that as a pathological case, China needs to receive shock therapy or some doses of international counseling for it to become adjusted to international norms. Finally, still absorbed in his personal self-interest, he may see China as a canvas to project his own ego, attitudes, feelings, and preferences.

To treat a foreign culture as a lengthened shadow of one’s emotivist self is quite commonplace. Associated with it is viewing the end of history as a structure of feeling and a high moral ground. From this perspective, China observers, media pundits, and students may all act like the aesthete, manager, or therapist. They do not have to be concerned with questions of what China is about, what this nation has been doing on its own terms, its history and revolutionary movements, or its creativity and agency. The Chinese narrative as a whole is shut down in favor of a bigger, ultimate mythology of global modernity and transnational capital. Like other countries, China is on track to catch up with the ultimate end of economic development, world markets, middle class prosperity, and liberal democracy. The question of ends is settled and what matters is the means to help China catch up with the West.

For the emotivist self, cultural difference is personal rather than social, and least of all national. This entails a nonchalant, connoisseur attitude toward distinct features of a culture. The blank slate of the emotivist self believes itself to be prior to

and free from attachment and ties to a culture and community, unencumbered by religion, family, memory or history. Thus one cannot and does not have to identify with any culture, not even with one's own. On the other hand, the individual can flirt with a randomly encountered culture for fifteen minutes while remaining blind to the parochial source of this quasi-universal, cosmopolitan stance. If culture is part of an ongoing project carried on by a public and a political community, our understanding of a culture cannot be an individualistic, consumerist preference, but must go into a specific context behind the individual. Disengaged from that background and flitting through different cultural objects, the egoistic reader of a foreign culture tends toward exoticism, fascination, and indifference, which reduces the study of a culture to a matter of personal likes or dislikes, taste, or style.

My favorite metaphor for this self-centered culture sampling is eating in a pan-Asian buffet restaurant. From a bird's eye view, the eater picks and chooses from a cosmopolitan array of foods. Buffet food sampling is analogous to the ways one relates to others and to unfamiliar cultures. Its assumption is that one culture can be as good as any other, as long as it suits my palate. In the age of global economic and military competition, however, the individual's freewheeling choice is severely threatened. The food sampling type of cosmopolitanism has to confront the emptiness of the relativist perception. In times of terror and vulnerability, the emotivist self will fall back to its own local foundation. Seeking anchorage and belonging, the emotivist, cosmopolitan believer would withdraw from the pluralistic void and begin to identify with the deeper roots and strive to become a believer in one's own past and national tradition.

In the triumphant phase of globalization, the national background seldom surfaces to the foreground. A citizen of a powerful nation-state like the US is frequently oblivious of the national origin of his attitude to foreign cultures. His self-centered, arbitrary choice declares that my cultural system is unique and makes sense on its own terms. It is also elevated to a universal culture and a standard of humanity. Although the citizen of a marginalized nation needs to resort to national memory and collective empowerment in asserting identity, the citizen of a "super-state" tends to be forgetful of the national culture and power that lie behind his private judgment and perception. As we approach the center of the world system, says Jameson, the "easier it is for its citizens to know the blindness of the center, to think of themselves in uniquely private terms, to forget national relations, [and] the foreign relations" (Jameson, 2008). Although these relations in fact define the attitude toward foreign cultures, they are not consciously felt and are often repressed and forgotten. This is a luxury that a struggling nation cannot afford.

On the other hand, traumatic events throw such "citizens of the world" and cosmopolitan culture back to the national background. A whole series of events in the last two decades—the September 11 attacks, the war in Iraq, financial crises, terrorist attacks, China's rise to power and the competition from Chinese-style globalization, chaos in the Middle East, and confrontation with Russia—have punctured the myth of economic globalization as the leveling ground. These developments have thrown a nation as powerful as the US into a state of crisis and vulnerability. A steady slide from the cosmopolitan height to the national ground is very much in the air. The nation-state is re-emerging as a fallback and as a source of identity, belonging, and power. The platform "Make America Great Again" propelled Donald Trump into the Oval Office, and ideas such as "the nation-state strikes back" have filled public discourse and media. Nostalgia for deep national roots is resurfacing in the center. A cursory look at recent Hollywood productions gives the impression that the nation-state is coming back and the sense of national community is on the rise. A revitalized nation-state seems a necessary counterforce in the face of alternative globalization carried on by emerging nations and economic competition from China.

One need only think of the Hollywood 007 blockbuster *Skyfall*, which won popular and critical acclaim and has had tremendous impact on the collective unconscious. The film centers on the series of battles between James Bond, the agent at his nation's service, and Patrice, the mercenary of a freewheeling terror and business group. Bond has retired and is presumed dead, but he comes back to serve the British intelligence agency. Having killed Patrice, Bond follows intelligence to trace the terror chief Raoul Silva, a denationalized former British agent. A globetrotter with no national allegiance and cultural identification, Silva runs a transnational underground business and owns a colony somewhere off

Macau. Much of his terror attacks aim at dismantling British intelligence to exact his revenge. Significantly, the decisive battle between the national agent and global freelancer Silva takes place in *Skyfall*. Though set in Scotland, *Skyfall* is portrayed as the home ground, with its sacred chapel, community, kinship ties, dilapidated homesteads, ancient houses, trees, and fields—the primordial home ground of merry old England. It is here that Bond, an agent of the nation-state, alongside other nationals and his kin, wages and wins the final battle against the “traitor” of the nation, the stateless, rootless “cosmopolitan.” The battle is to be read as the triumph of a re-grouped force with local and national allegiance and identification with the state—forgotten building blocks of the Empire—against a nameless, stateless group. The Silva group, with its global operation in East Asia, is in fact the flipside of neoliberal globalization and the byproduct of free market fundamentalism.

King’s Speech, another film strongly evocative of the return to the national, presents a heroic attempt on the part of the British monarch to overcome the loss of speech—a symbol of national crisis and political disarray. With great effort, the king recovers his speech and is able to raise a coherently nationalist voice. While getting back one’s speech looks like an individual or existential narrative in the person of the king, it is also an allegorical tale of how the Empire will survive and achieve a second coming by overcoming the loss of speech and national incoherence. Indeed, films and literature of the metropolitan center often contain as much national allegory as do Third World narratives.

For all the national return, however, it is still fashionable in academic discourse to celebrate the cosmopolitan convergence of nations into one village. Travel, border-crossing, exchange, communication, population movement, diaspora, international organizations, human rights, the waning of the nation-state, and so on all contribute to the shining façade of transnationalism and stylistic cosmopolitanism. What this façade screens off is the stark reality of continuous geopolitical conflict and rivalry among the aggressive nation-states, and uneven economic and social development between North and South. As one travels across borders (usually with an American passport), the major powers busily redraw and tighten the borderlines, and while one exchanges goods and ideas apparently purged of national distinctions, some nation-states carry on military buildup and impose trade sanctions and barriers. The new signs of great power politics have prompted warnings of a new cold war.

On the home front, this nationalist rhetoric serves as an alibi for demographic management of diverse ethnic workforce or for seeking votes from the brown, black, or yellow. Under the rubric of multiculturalism, it makes diversity absolute and widens the abyss of ethnic and cultural differences, thus naturalizing the fact of domination and inequality between the privileged and underprivileged, powerful and powerless. By treating the asymmetry of power as a matter of nature, multiculturalism becomes a domestic version of global inequality. Cultural knowledge is seen as being increasingly local, increasingly specific, hermetically sealed from potential communication and connection with others. Different cultures are divided along lines of ethnicity, moral value, locality, gender, custom, and nation. When dealing with a text or a film, one is often required to ascertain who is speaking, what his ethnic or religious background is, from what place and what time he or she is speaking, and so forth. The singular pronoun “I” is favored over the plural “we,” and individual or ethnic identity is privileged over collective voice. Knowledge increasingly becomes the voice of a certain partisan agenda, an apologia for interest groups, and the alibi of manipulation. Indeed, the voice of reconciliation is frequently deemed suspicious as a sinister rhetoric of ideology. This division also fragmentizes the effort to understand a culture other than my own. Open-minded scholars hesitate to use a “Western,” “external” lens to look at China, as if a cultural specific discourse must stay put in its own track before encountering the other.

Given the exaggerated sense of cultural and geopolitical difference, it is difficult for a student to deal with China seriously and to see China as a nation with a living history written and made by active historical agents. It shuts off potential attachment to China because the country appears to be just one of many objects and presents a static, unchanging picture. Is it possible to take a culture seriously without emotional attachment, without sympathy? Conversely, does one run the risk of being narrowly nationalistic when one invests passion in the cultural texts of a nation?

In recent years, the Chinese revolution is often avoided in favor of China's modernization, development strategies, and integration into the global economy. Seeing China as part of worldwide culture industries, these approaches treat the Chinese revolution as if it were a completely separate narrative from liberal, capitalist modernity. Turning a blind eye to the colonial conditions and anti-imperialist struggle, it is easier to remain neutral and uncommitted to the understanding of the Chinese people as active agents of history. But studying a culture is unlike studying computer science, and emotional investment is unavoidable. One may claim that the ideologically charged subject of revolution has been cast away as a relic of a bygone past. But the Chinese revolution is a historical fact, and its implications are still alive and deserve serious consideration as long as the revolution's unresolved problems persist. The revolution always reflects ruptures and contradictions, precipitating violence, upheaval, and rebuilding in a society. The forgetting of the revolution belies the historical complexity of reality and its poignant narratives. If we treat the revolution as part of Chinese history, as the attempt of a collective trying to accomplish its own ends, we will be able to approach it as a humanly intelligible and historically understandable phenomenon.

The value-neutral, scientific attitude refuses to make sense of the subjective, popular, and social significance of the Chinese revolution. Mortgaged to the modernization narrative and developmental theories, this attitude is a latter-day version of the disembodied blank slate of Cartesian consciousness. By rendering neutrality absolute, it becomes a mirror image of the emotivist stance. In studying a nonwestern culture, this stance ignores the moral belief that other people are also endowed with the equal right and rationality to say "No" to what "I" have accepted as universally valid. This arrogance is manifest in a whole series of binaries that sustain the supposedly objective scheme of things: reason vs. myth, modernity vs. tradition, liberalism vs. authority, civil society vs. community, city vs. country, science vs. nature, and reason vs. emotion. Standing over the object in order to investigate its objective law, this figure of cognition may be one of reason dealing with a wilderness of unreason or an exercise in theory hovering over a field of raw facts. It may also be a historian dealing with a "people without history" and attempting to read human anatomy back to the subhuman species, as Marx's metaphor portrays. Sleepers to be awakened in history's waiting room, the Chinese people must be called upon to board the next train en route to modernity. In his discussion of Said's *Orientalism*, Benjamin Schwartz points out that even the critique of Orientalism is not free from the value-neutral mode of inquiry:

It is a mode of thought that posits a conception of a universal normal path of social growth, evolution, development, or history from the entire human race. The underlying metaphor is that of the growth of a biological organism applied to societies. Its enthusiastic acceptance in the nineteenth century West was based on the belief that Western humanity had finally made the breakthrough to the maturity of the human race. (Schwartz, 1996, p. 111)

To Schwartz, this attitude is as much a temporal as a spatial hubris. But as critics, teachers, and students, we often feed on this hubris in our unreflective hours of academic research and teaching.

This universalism refuses to take the study of a foreign culture seriously because it refuses to recognize that culture as an end in itself. It is easy to maintain a neutral stance if one imagines oneself outside Chinese culture and relates to it only as one relates to an antique or archeological find. Studying China thus becomes a matter of using a normative standard to look at the variations, deviations, or specificity of that cultural entity. Comfortably secured in a position of scientific certainty one can imagine one's approach to be completely neutral and untainted by national and ideological interests. This neutrality, however, does work if one extends sympathy to China, in the manner of one human person sympathizing with another and trying to understand his or her growth and setbacks. This sympathetic involvement stems from the moral conviction that the Chinese people, and not a particular power structure, are the real author of China and the maker of Chinese history.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

BAN WANG 王斑 is the William Haas Endowed Chair Professor in Chinese Studies at Stanford University. He was formerly the Yangtze River Chair Professor at East China Normal University in Shanghai. His major publications include *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth Century China* (Stanford UP 1997), *Illuminations from the Past* (Stanford UP 2004), *History and Memory* (in Chinese, Oxford UP, 2004), and *Narrative Perspective and Irony in Chinese and American Fiction* (2002). He edited *Words and Their Stories: Essays on the Language of the Chinese Revolution* (Brill, 2010) and *Chinese Visions of World Order* (Duke UP 2017). He co-edited *Trauma and Cinema* (Hong Kong UP, 2004), *The Image of China in the American Classroom* (Nanjing UP, 2005), *China and New Left Visions* (Lexington, 2012), and *Debating Socialist Legacy in China* (Palgrave, 2014). He was a research fellow with the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2000 and with the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 2007. He has taught at Beijing Foreign Studies University, SUNY-Stony Brook, Harvard University, Rutgers University, Seoul National University and Yonsei in Korea, and East China Normal University. He co-edited the issue of *Telos* (summer 2010) *China: Critical Theory, Market Society, and Culture* and co-taught the National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar Shanghai and Berlin: Urban Modernism in 2010 and 2011.