



## China's Mother River Scolds Her Young: Modernization and the National

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**Abstract:** The search for modernity has been central to Chinese cultural debates in the twentieth century. One argument that has commonly been expressed is the fear that the price of modernity will be traditional values. Tradition is strongly linked to the countryside, and as a way of clearing a space for the modern in urban centres, this link has led to the rejection of the countryside has that which is holding the nation back in its quest. But recently nature has been breaking out of these representations and bringing the consequences of the degradation it has suffered back into the arena of urban attention. This is discussed through an examination of the countryside in two cultural texts, and then in light of the case of the deforestation along the Yellow River, which has contributed to erosion, desertification and other consequences that enter the urban centres.

**Key terms:** China, national identity, cultural politics, environmental protection, modernization, Yellow River

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In 2008 Beijing will host the Olympic Games. This is a momentous victory for millions of Chinese who see it as emblematic of China's entry into the international community. Like China's recent entry into the World Trade Organization, this is a symbolic marker. It defines the end of China's search for modernity, for now modernity has been found.

The campaign to win the right to host the Games was everywhere apparent in the city during the lead up to the selection announcement in 2001. Public events were said to embody the people's Olympic hope; streets were cleaned, new trees planted, and road works commenced in anticipation. This was Beijing's chance to show the world that what they were capable of, what the city could become. The slogan that dominated the bid campaign was 'New Beijing, Great Olympics' (*Xin Beijing, Xin Aoyun*). The hosting of the Games was associated with a vision of a re-born city, purged of its sins of the past. No longer will Beijing be first thought of as the site of the Tiananmen Massacre, no longer the place where Mao declared the People's Republic, no longer the home of imperial rulers. It would henceforth be thought of as the Olympic city and in this join an elite clique of cities that have held this honour.

But how has this transformation of the space of Beijing been imagined? And how does it affect the way the iconic images that represent China to itself are understood? Are there repercussions for the new image of the city, or does the terrain of old quietly disappear? As China turns attention to the possibilities opening up in the global context, the non-human environment on which they all depend is

rapidly deteriorating. And while for many these problems are considerably less interesting or enticing than the romance of the modern world beyond, they are not problems that will go away. Pollution levels are extreme, clean water is in short supply, species are disappearing and desertification is severe, bringing thousands of tons of dust and sand into northern cities each spring. The physical space of the nation and the state of its health cannot be ignored.

This is as much a cultural issue as it is an economic or scientific one. The conflict between tradition and modernization that was prevalent in Chinese cultural texts throughout the twentieth century still provides an important angle of approach for an understanding of the decision-making process in China's future. Preceding from an examination of the tension between tradition and modernization as it is embodied in cultural representations of the space of the nation, we can then look at how forces beyond the will of the people play into this dynamic.

## **To be Chinese**

What it means to be Chinese has been a characteristic concern of many twentieth century Chinese cultural texts. A central issue in debates on this topic have been focussed on how to reconcile tradition and modernization. There has been a strong desire to be both traditionally Chinese and simultaneously modern, but this has largely been definitionally pre-empted.

Any articulation of Chinese modernity is prone to reductionism. There seem always to be exceptions, complications and comparisons to other expressions of modernity, such as those found in the West, or in Japan (Shih, 2001: 4-5). I have chosen to focus on modernization as one form instrumental in the expression of modernity. In the developmental process of modernization, which contemporary institutions such as the WTO and the Olympic Committee insist upon, certain global standards must be attained and upheld, and this will inevitably involve a degree of compromise in the expression of domestic agendas. This kind of modernity, as expressed through modernization, is only one way of thinking about modernism in China, and as a result there are many issues concerning the modern that will not be addressed in this paper.

Modernization has strong roots in the May Fourth Movement, which was a culmination of cultural dissatisfaction occurring in and around 1919. Reformers of this period felt that China needed to be rejuvenated in order to cope with the challenges of warlordism and foreign invasions (Spence, 1999: 302). There is a clear desire in the dominant articulations of modernism during the May Fourth period to create a break with the past; at this time students were travelling overseas to study and were there encountering new ideas, and the imperial order had fallen in 1911, thus creating a space for new ideas as old ones were no longer so firmly entrenched. Consequently, a distinction arose between the priorities of the past and the present, and between the traditional and the modern.

These splits have been further organized along geographical divisions. Tradition and the past are fantastically located in the countryside, while the modern and the future inhabit urban areas. There is nothing uniquely Chinese in this construct and, as is common in cultures across the world, the Chinese countryside is often used as a symbolic marker of the nation. The specificities of non-urban areas, the features of the landscape, and the agricultural conditions found there, are often used as indicators of what is unique about the nation state. In Australia it can be Uluru, or

the outback, in the United States it can be the Grand Canyon, in Canada, maple trees. These are all deemed safe symbols of traditional values. In a fast-paced, modern, urban present, the traditional values of the nation are safely stored in the countryside. In so doing, the countryside comes to be seen as the past of the city (Han, 1985:4). Expressed in different terms, tradition, and by association the countryside, are both relegated in time and space (Duncan: 1993: 40).

One of the most prominent natural icons used to represent China since 1949 is the Yellow River, often referred to as the Mother River, the cradle of Chinese civilization. It flows west to east across the north of China running through the loess plateau, an arid region that has always presented harsh conditions for those who live there. It is in this region, where the loess and the river have existed for thousands of years, that the Han people, the ethnic majority in China, came from. It was here that *Yellow Earth (Huang Tudi)* (Chen Kaige, 1983), a film at the start of the wave of Fifth Generation filmmakers dealing with the Communist penetration of the countryside, was set. It was also here that the Communists made their base at Yan'an between 1936 and 1947, where they built their strength before taking control of the nation. This region holds immense historical and cultural significance for the construction of Chinese identity, especially in the north. Its barren landscape is synonymous with Chineseness. Yet the land and the river are dying. The pressure of supporting the massive population and resourcing economic development has taken its toll. The river is dry for longer and longer each year (Li, 1999: 16), and the desert is creeping across the grasslands (Jiang, 1999: 55-6). Not only is this eroding landscape symbolic of the past urban China is trying to leave behind, it also poses a serious threat to the future the nation is trying to build for itself.

## Representing the Land

Two key discourses have been evident in texts set in the countryside throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On one hand is the representation of the countryside as the 'real China', the locus of the Chinese essence, which is threatened by modernization. On the other is the depiction of the countryside as backward, as that which is inhibiting the nation in its quest for modernization. There is considerable tension between these two paradigmatic discourses, as one rejects and the other longs for that which the countryside symbolizes. But in recent years, through a series of environmental disasters, it has become increasingly apparent that these representations of the landscape are inadequate. The countryside will not be tamed into these constructed frameworks. While these images operate prominently in the urban cultural imagination, the living countryside subverts both the nostalgia and the stagnation imposed upon it from the centre.

A note here on the relationship between landscape and countryside is needed, for part of the tension I am trying to describe arises from the conflation of the two. A landscape is a cultural product; it is imagined and constructed.

Landscape is not countryside, it cannot be entered, worked, or in any way made ordinary. It is visible only on the level of icon, and those that do enter it themselves become icons, elements of the cultural imaginary, and their meaning is in fixed relation to the meaning of the landscape. (Donald, 1997: 100)

Significantly, the countryside in China functions as both a symbolic national landscape and as a site of lived experience. This means that while symbolic meanings and associations are attributed to it in the cultural imaginary, those who

inhabit that space continually challenge and threaten those constructs. Those who live in the countryside and work on the land, move in and out of the national landscape. They refuse a fixed meaning and they undermine that of the imagined national landscape in the process.

Further, the effects of human use (and abuse) of the land erode the fantastic veneer of the landscape. The state of the countryside spills over onto the national landscape, and the meaning of that landscape is destabilized. That which is supposed to be unalterable, representing the strength and longevity of the nation, is not. This forces the attention of the urbanite back onto the problematic concept of 'Chineseness' and away from more pleasant projected visions of the utopian, global future that the Olympic Games is seen as a doorway into. The countryside, and the national landscape it constitutes, needs to be attended to and integrated into China's vision of itself in the future. Otherwise, the ills of the land will find their way into the cities and undermine the new image of the nation.

### **Leaving the countryside behind - Lu Xun's 'Old Home'**

Written in 1921, Lu Xun's short story 'My Old Home' (*Guxiang*) tells the story of a man (the narrator) returning to the village he grew up in, having lived and worked in the city for more than twenty years. He is returning to help pack up and sell his ancestral home, and move his mother and nephew back to the city with him. It is a trip of final farewell.

As we drew near my former home the day became overcast and a cold wind blew into the cabin of our boat, while all one could see through the chinks in our bamboo awning were a few desolate villages, void of any sign of life, scattered far and near under the sombre yellow sky. I could not help feeling depressed. (Lu, 1972: 54)

This is the description of the narrator's first impression of his homeland on his return. It is a bleak and barren scene, immediately conveying the reading of the countryside as symbolic of the stagnant nature of traditional Chinese society. The yellow sky suggests the story's setting is in northern China; it evokes the Yellow River and the yellow loess so characteristic of the region.

When he is reacquainted with Runtu, his childhood friend, the narrator finds himself face to face with a weathered peasant, a stereotype still as familiar to contemporary Chinese urbanites as it was to audiences eighty years ago. Runtu's life has been hard, he doesn't say much, but his face tells this story in its lines and wrinkles. The lives of the two men have taken very different paths and the divide that has grown between them is profound. The narrator mourns this divergence. The childhood friends have little if anything in common now, and the narrator ends the story with his hopes for a better future for both their children.

I hope they will not be like us, that they will not allow a barrier to grow up between them. ... They should have a new life, a life we have never experienced (Lu, 1972: 63)

The story was written shortly after the Treaty of Versailles put more Chinese territory into foreign hands; an act viewed as international confirmation of China's own sense of weakness and inferiority. Many intellectuals during the May Fourth Movement used this event as a catalyst to call for reform so China could become a stronger, more modern state. This message of the need for change, modernization and reform give Lu Xun's story its thematic significance. The narrator's journey home is a journey into the past, for the countryside, the village and the peasants are all associated with

a time gone by (Feuerwerker, 1998: 80) and a way of life of old. The countryside is denied coevalness (Fabian, 1983: 31), and relegated to the past, while the city occupies the space of the present and indeed of the future. The traditional life of the peasants, here conveyed through Runtu, is shown to be hard and sorrowful. It is the way of the past that no longer need be the way people live.

But this is also a very personal story imbued with a deep nostalgia for the rural homeland of the narrator. His memories of his childhood, whether actual or imagined, are full of life and colour, in marked contrast to the bleak surroundings he now finds himself in. The memories evoked by this re-acquaintance with his past "sprang into life like a flash of lightning, and I seemed to see my beautiful old home" (Lu, 1972: 55). He is disillusioned by the world he now finds himself in, for it is not the world he remembers, and he is overcome with nostalgia for the childhood innocence he has lost (Feuerwerker, 1998: 80-1). It is the innocence that is lost in the process of growing up, but it is also a loss resulting from his moving to the city, away from the traditional influences of the countryside. This move marks the profound difference between his present circumstances and those of Runtu.

This nostalgia is perhaps a way of coming to terms with the need for reform that is the central theme of the story. It is the "fear of forgetting one's origins, forgetting one's native land, of losing one's true nature, of losing oneself" (Zhao, 1993: 18-9). This is the very fear that China has wrestled with since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: while there is a great desire to be modern, it is accompanied by this fear of loss that is seen as an inevitable part of the process. Lu Xun articulated this in 1921 as clearly as if he had been writing in 2001. The fears are the same.

### **Rejecting the countryside - The 'River Elegy'**

In 1988 the six-part television documentary *Heshang (River Elegy)* was broadcast on CCTV (China Central Television). It takes the form of a montage of images accompanied by a rhetoric-laden voiceover analysing China's place in the world and narrating how the images should be read. The central argument is that China can only save itself and regain its former cultural greatness through modernization and Westernisation (Wang, 1996: 118). The images focus on the cultural icons of the nation, the Yellow River and loess plateau in particular. Throughout the series the river is portrayed as the enemy of the people, causing tremendous devastation when it floods. Just as the floods have plagued the Chinese throughout history, as a result of their dependence on the river, so has their inability to break the bonds of traditional society inhibited the modernization of the nation.

The peasants are depicted as superstitious and of 'low quality' (*sushi cha*), a concept frequently used in relation to rural populations moving to the cities and allegedly threatening social stability (Jacka, 1998: 48). They are closely associated with the land, and it is this dependent relationship that is claimed to keep them from gaining any 'quality'.

For thousands of years now, Chinese have wrested their food from the earth, facing the yellow soil with their backs to the sky. The soil is the very root of their existence, a treasure passed from generation to generation, the entire meaning of human life. (Su and Wang, 1991: 119)

The countryside is portrayed as a spent force in the construction of the nation.

Only when this land, which used up its milk in nurturing our people, can finally emerge from agricultural civilization, only then can the Chinese people truly enter the twenty-first century. (Su and Wang, 1991: 181)

It is argued that China must turn away from the countryside, focus not on the Yellow River, an ancient symbol of the nation, but rather on the ocean and the world beyond. The final images of the series are of the Yellow River meeting the sea and dissolving into the greater ocean (*Heshang*, 1988). In conjunction with the narration, it is an image used to portray the relative might of the world beyond China, of the Western world that lies on the other side of that ocean and has embraced modernity.

But even in *Heshang*, Chinese tradition is not condemned outright, revealing the inability of the writers to break completely with the nation's past. Rather, it is rejected because it has failed to fulfil its great potential, and in this way has ultimately failed the nation.

No wonder some young scholars say with a sigh that their tremendous cultural wealth has become a tremendous cultural burden, that their feeling of tremendous cultural superiority has become a feeling of tremendous cultural inferiority; and this we cannot but admit is a tremendous psychological obstacle standing in the course of China's modernization. (Su and Wang, 1991: 211)

The final sequence shows the river flowing into the sea, mixing with the waters of the ocean. It doesn't show the river stopping and the sea beginning, the river unable to penetrate its foreign blueness. This image, though such a reading does run contrary to the narration that plays over it, could be read as symbolic of the need for traditional Chineseness to be part of the mix that is Chinese modernity. The specificity of being Chinese, that is as marked in the representations of the land as it is in other cultural arenas, should be carried forward into the new, modern world China is entering.

### **Nature fights back**

Still, the dominant images of the land are associated with the past while urban-scapes are strongly linked to the future. But these images cannot fix in place the disruptive reality. Numerous environmental issues are taking their toll on urban centres. In apartment buildings in cities along the Yellow River, it is common for only residents on the first and second floors to get a regular water supply as there is not enough water to reach higher floors, especially in the increasing number of months each year when the riverbed is dry. In Beijing in recent years, sandstorms have become a serious issue in spring, and they are occurring earlier and becoming more severe. In 2002 the storms began in March. One of the earliest lasted 51 hours and brought 30 000 tons of sand into the city in that time (CND, 24 March 2002). The source of all this sand is the Gobi Desert, which is moving ever closer to the city. At its closest point it is now about 70kms from the city. Overgrazing and overexploitation of the land in the regions to the west of the city have caused the rapid desertification. This in turn is due to the demands placed on farmers and the land to provide higher levels of produce and more consumer goods for increasing numbers of people. The list of such issues varies from region to region across China, and it is a long and disturbing list.

In mid-March 2002 a rare acknowledgement of the severity of Beijing's sandstorms was made. While they have been regarded as a serious problem, there has generally been an attitude of 'everything will somehow be alright' to accompany such issues. But this year, it was publicly conceded that the sandstorms are a significant source of concern for the 2008 Olympic Games (CND, 18 March 2001). The encroaching desert to the west of the city cannot be tamed that quickly. The tree planting projects that have been carried out in the region in recent years have been inadequate. Very few

of these kinds of admissions have been made and it is a significant change in official attitude that they are heard at all. It is in this attitudinal shift that hope for the future can be located.

### **Revisiting the past - Saving the Mother River**

The China Youth Development Foundation (*Zhongguo Qing Shao Nian Fazhan Jijinhui*), a semi-autonomous government agency, is running a campaign in conjunction with the popular magazine *Reader (Duzhe)* to plant trees along the Yellow River in order to combat desertification and erosion in the arid northern regions. Their slogan is 'Save the Mother River by Planting a Reader's Forest' ('*Baohu Muqin He, Gong Jian Duzhe Lin*') and the images they use to promote the campaign include a map of China with the Yellow River drawn as a dragon, its mouth the delta (*Zhongguo Qing Jihui Tongji*, 2000: 1), and an old, weathered peasant woman gazing across the vista of the river winding through a valley (*Duzhe*, 2001:32-3). They are images that conjure up the spirit of China's long and ancient traditional heritage and tie it explicitly to the saving of the Yellow River region.

This is a new take on the conventional representations of the countryside. Here the essence of Chineseness is linked to the countryside as a reason for it to be a focus of central attention rather than a reason to look away from it. It is on the back of the uniquely Chinese associations that can be so readily made with the landscape of the Yellow River that the urges for saving that landscape are made. The message is: if we don't protect the river's environs, then we lose not only those natural features, but all the cultural connections we have to that landscape as well. And people have responded to this message. Thousands of people have made donations to the campaign, ranging from pocket money donations from primary school children through to large donations from the corporate sector (*Zhongguo Qing Jihui Tongji*, 2000: 3).

The modern knowledge base and technologies that are becoming increasingly available to China now need to be accessed to use these funds to maximum efficiency. A pride and nostalgic longing for the cultural traditions associated with the river needs to be joined by the modern understanding of ecosystems that can ensure suitable types of trees are planted along the river and that these trees are properly cared for so as to achieve the goals of decreased erosion and desertification. These have been serious problems in planting projects in the past, and mistakes of this kind have contributed to the rate of desertification and impact of sandstorms in the cities (CND, 24 March 2002). It is vital that China soon witness some dramatic successes in combating environmental problems so as to maintain the passionate hope of those who organize drives such as 'Save the Mother River'. If a campaign of this type, that has the potential to integrate both modern and traditional values and scientific and cultural knowledge can be successful, then we can all take hope that the lessons nature continues to give us will be lessons well learned.

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