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What Does It Mean to Be or to Become Chinese? Interdisciplinary Reflections on Chinese Identity

Daniel A. Bell

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue exploring the question "What Does It Mean to Be or to Become Chinese?" Eight leading scholars from diverse backgrounds and disciplines wrote articles that discuss this question from three (somewhat overlapping) perspectives: A descriptive perspective, a historical perspective, and a normative perspective. I summarize each article and add some critical commentary.

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This morning I woke up from a bad dream. It was one of those "stuck in an examination room" scenarios. All the other students had completed the exam. For some reason, I was late, and I was given special dispensation to write the exam on my own. But the teacher didn't give me enough time. I had only one hour and fifteen minutes and I begged the teacher for more time. She was unmoved. I woke up in a cold sweat. Here's the question I was supposed to answer: "What does it mean to be, or to become, Chinese?"

The reader may wonder why I would want to investigate a topic so bafflingly complex that my unconscious self turns into nightmares. It might seem even more peculiar given that I'm neither a Chinese citizen nor of Chinese heritage. So let me begin with a bit of personal history. In 2007, the editor of an academic periodical in the West planted the idea in my head. As part of a special series on identity, he asked me to write an

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essay on what it means to be Chinese. At the time, I laughed off the suggestion. I had only recently arrived in mainland China and still felt like a foreigner.

Over the next decade, however, I became more integrated in Chinese social and academic life. My Chinese friends, only half-jokingly, sometimes said I was more "Chinese" than many other Chinese. I began to think that "being Chinese" is something one could "become" with sufficient effort: It means learning the language and adhering to certain beliefs and living by those beliefs. So I wrote a short article for *The Wall Street Journal* with the headline "Why Anyone Can Be Chinese." I drew on history to argue that Chineseness had traditionally been understood as a cultural identity until Chinese intellectuals and political reformers learned from the West that people can be categorized into races. Starting from the late 19th century, Chineseness came to be mistakenly seen as a racial identity. If we object to racism, we need to recover the more inclusive and traditional idea of what it means to be Chinese.

My article was not particularly original,[1] but it generated a firestorm of objections.[2] I realized I needed to learn more in order to say something semi-persuasive on the topic. And the best way to learn is to ask leading scholars who have worked on related questions from different disciplinary perspectives for their thoughts (needless to say, relying on other scholars needs to be complemented by one's own reading and other ways of learning).[3] *The China Review* liked the idea and provided space for such essays. To our pleasant surprise, almost all the leading scholars we contacted agreed to write essays on Chinese identity.

We asked philosophers, historians, and legal theorists from diverse backgrounds to prepare articles on the theme of what it means to be, or to become, Chinese. The conference was due to take place in Hong Kong but we had to move it online due to COVID restrictions. The conference was bilingual (English and Chinese), with each speaker speaking in his or her preferred language. The contributors presented their articles and scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds served as commentators. The articles were revised in response to the comments and we publish them here.[4]

The question of Chineseness can be explored from (at least!) three perspectives: A descriptive perspective, a historical perspective, and a normative perspective. Articles by Zhao Tingyang and Roger Ames show that to be, or to become, Chinese means to partake of a relational worldview. Articles by Patricia Ebrey and Peter Bol discuss the changing

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perspectives on Chinese identity in history. Articles by Wang Pei, Albert Chen, Huang Ko-Wu, and Shuchen Xiang are more explicitly normative in orientation: To be(come) Chinese means to have certain commitments to the family (Wang), the country (Chen, Huang), and/or the world (Xiang). Some articles straddle between the different perspectives but we can use this three-fold distinction to help us make sense of what it means to be(come) Chinese. Let me say a bit more about each article in the context of these perspectives, with some critical commentary as well.

1. A Relational Worldview

The first two articles, written by philosophers, argue that Chineseness is a way of understanding the world: We are embedded in relations without clear boundaries with other people and the rest of the world. This relational and contextual way of understanding the world contrasts with the dominant Western emphasis on eternal and unchangeable goods and God(s). Zhao Tingyang, professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, identifies a "methodological China" that is dominant in Chinese history. According to this understanding, to be, or to become, Chinese means to be flexible in thinking and doing rather than adhere to "unchangeable fundamentalist faiths." More specifically, Zhao shows that exemplars developed according to practical needs play a key role in Chinese culture. Chinese thinking is history based and oriented to empiricism and pragmatism and relational in the sense that all things are supposed to be interconnected. The Chinese art of war, games (such as Go), martial arts and traditional medicine all emphasize flexibility and the pursuit of opportunities offered by particular relations and configurations rather than acontextual rules and well-planned programs with clear end goals.

Roger Ames, Humanities Chair Professor in the philosophy department at Peking University, is similarly critical of the "transcendental pretense" of substance ontology. Ames argues that Chinese persons are "human becomings" within an unbounded field of experience, rather than self-sufficient "beings" that have only incidental relations to other things and beings, with the implication that "everyone is in degree a participant in this shared and unbounded cultural ecology, and is thus, more or less Chinese." Ames compares Confucian-style "process philosophy" to John Dewey's pragmatic view that experience itself is always a collaborative and unbounded affair. We all partake of "interdependent

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organic forces of human interaction," with the implication that everyone is more or less American as well. Americans can also be Chinese if they view themselves as dynamic and interactive "human becomings."

The articles by Zhao and Ames spell out an influential understanding of how Chinese intellectuals understand what it means to be, or to become, Chinese. However, they put forward a thin conception of identity that is difficult to reconcile with uses of "Chineseness" in ordinary speech. It seems odd to claim that anyone can be(come) Chinese so long as they adhere to a relational understanding of the self. A pragmatic American who does not identify in any way with China would be surprised to learn that he or she should be viewed, deep down, as Chinese. Surely Chinese identity depends, to a certain extent on self-understanding. And such self-understandings of Chineseness are normally much thicker than adhering to a relational worldview; they typically include knowledge of the Chinese language, Chinese heritage and citizenship, and pride in Chinese culture and history.

In short, adherence to a particular understanding of the world is not sufficient for thinking about what it means to be(come) Chinese. One may add that the adherence to a relational view of the self and the world is not even necessary. For one thing, Zhao and Ames present highly intellectualized understanding of Chineseness that may not be shared by "ordinary" Chinese. If a farmer in rural China is attached to his own family and regards strangers as hostile outsiders, he is not Chinese? Or consider a devout Muslim or Christian in China who is convinced there is a transcendental, all-knowing and unchanging God. If she thinks she's Chinese, who are we to disagree?

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2. Historical Perspectives

Zhao and Ames appeal to history to make their points by invoking the lasting influence of classical texts such as *The Book of Changes* and showing the flexible, cultural way of incorporating minority groups into Chinese culture. At the end of the day, however, they put forward a big picture worldview that is meant to describe what it means to be Chinese now and for the foreseeable future and they readily admit that Chinese history is messier, with many "counter-examples." For professional historians, it's important to portray history in all its complexity and diversity, including the less-than-admirable aspects. As Yuri Pines puts it, "in China's lengthy history we can find bitter ethnic-based clashes that could

reach genocidal proportions, but also the amalgamation of different ethnicities and, most notably, manifold political occurrences in which the participants' ethnicity did not play any discernible role. Trying to reduce this rich evidence to a single conceptualization of "Chineseness" (either exclusive or inclusive) is untenable."[5] If we want a full account of what it means to be(come) Chinese, we need to look at Chinese history (or histories) for answers.

Patricia Buckley Ebrey, professor emeritus at the University of Washington, argues that we need to bring history and science together to develop a more grounded understanding of the growth of the Han Chinese ethnic group over time. Ebrey looks at what the Chinese wrote about their "we group" versus foreign others from approximately 400 to 1500 and finds a tension between the Confucian culturalist view that what makes people Chinese is acting Chinese and the view that what makes people Chinese is Chinese ancestry. The genetic evidence from contemporary populations in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and ancient DNA from archeological sites shows that the population of Han Chinese increased by creating unfavorable conditions for indigenous peoples in south, hence casting doubt on the Confucian culturalist story that the Han Chinese grew in size because the non-Han population "came to see the truth of the higher culture connected to Chinese textual conditions and voluntarily joined the majority."

Peter K. Bol, Charles H. Carswell Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, shows that the discourse developed around the term *zhong guo* (中國) from the mid-eighth to the early sixteenth century was understood as one side in the binary *zhong guo* and *yidi* (夷狄; tribal peoples) rather than "China" in the contemporary sense of the word. The geopolitical situation, when dynasties were confronted by tribal confederations that had turned to state building, was usually seen as antagonistic rather than resolving itself into a harmonious unity based on Confucian culture. The sociopolitical situation, with expansion of a national elite whose claim to privilege and power was based on learning rather than family pedigree, was understood more in terms of culture and moral philosophy. The "international" situation required attention to ethnicity but the "domestic" examination system was open to talent regardless of ethnicity and Confucian elites defended the ideal of a universal culture open to all. Wang Hui identifies a similar dynamic in the Qing dynasty. On the one hand, the Manchu rulers affirmed "Manchu and Han are one" and sought to legitimize "minority

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rule" at home by a purely cultural understanding of government with Confucian ritual and filial piety at its base. On the other hand, they enshrined the ethnic superiority of the Manchu in various policies and allowed for a lot of cultural pluralism in the "periphery" as a way to expand and maintain their multi-ethnic empire.[6]

These historical findings help to explain the changing meaning of "Chineseness" in different times and places and also expose the gap between the ideal of Confucian universalism and the reality of exclusion and second-class status for non-Han minority groups in China (and for Han Chinese when "outsiders" ruled China). But we cannot cynically conclude that the ugly reality is all there is. The Confucian ideal may have minimized even worse abuses and naked oppression.[7] Racism was rarely held up as an ideal and may help to explain why, for example, slaves in China were never regarded as non-humans (compared to the institution of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome).[8] For contemporary purposes, the work of historians reminds us of the need to be sensitive to what's feasible and what's not and how ideals can often be abused in practice. But we still need to develop an ideal that allows social critics to expose what's wrong with certain ideas of Chineseness and provides guidance for improvement for the future. Here's where explicit normative theorizing is necessary.

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3. What "Chineseness" Ought To Be

What it means to be Chinese is not just a descriptive account of a worldview. Zhao and Ames suggest that the relational worldview is worth defending and disseminating, but they do not explicitly argue for the superiority of that view, nor for the view that certain social relations are better than others (Mafia families also have strong family ties, for example). Nor is "being/becoming" Chinese simply a historical account of Chineseness. Confucian universalism, at least in some interpretations, may have been morally desirable in Chinese history. Both Ebrey and Bol seem to have normative orientations in the background when they discuss Chinese identity in different times and places. In everyday speech (speaking from personal experience), to be called "Chinese" is often a term of praise and one can be criticized for being insufficiently "Chinese." So we need explicit normative theorizing to make sense of and to clarify the values and commitments underlying what it means to be(come) Chinese, for now and the foreseeable future.

Wang Pei, assistant professor with the School of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong, shows that filial piety, or reverence for elderly parents, has been regarded as a key ethical norm in Confucianism and is still widely viewed as an important aspect of what it means to be a virtuous Chinese person today. But filial piety often had bad consequences in Chinese history—especially for women—and it was severely attacked by Chinese intellectuals in the twentieth century. Hence, there is a need to reinterpret filial piety so it is morally desirable in modern China. In contrast to earlier interpretations (or distortions) that emphasized the obligation of adult children to revere parents even if they were horrible parents, today the norm should be reciprocal: Adult children only have strong obligations to revere their parents if parents expressed and manifested long-lasting love and care for their children when they were young. In politics, it means that laws and policies should facilitate the realization of filial piety by such means as education and tax breaks, but it should not be legally compulsory given that parents often mistreat or commit violence against their own children. Wang reminds us that feelings of love between children and parents may be innate, but the virtues of filial piety and parental love require conscious effort.

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To be(come) Chinese is not just a matter of being a good family member; it also means to have a certain relation to China the country. In traditional China, state boundaries were not always rigid and Confucian intellectuals often invoked the ideal of *tianxia*, a unified and harmonious world without any territorial boundaries. Today, China is here to stay with relatively fixed boundaries and to be(come) Chinese means to be(come) a citizen of the Chinese state. Albert H. Y. Chen, Cheng Chan Lan Yue Professor and Chair of Constitutional Law at the University of Hong Kong, discusses the evolution of modern Chinese national law. The legal concept of nationality was a Western import into China in the late 19th century and it changed in response to different social and political contexts and the international environment in which China found itself. The Qing Nationality Law in 1909 adhered to the principle that the nationality of an individual is mainly determined by the nationality of his or her father. The 1929 nationality law of the Republic of China adopted some reforms more friendly to gender equality, but it maintained the Chinese nationality of overseas Chinese. The PRC's nationality law in 1980 substituted a gender-neutral version of the *jus sanguinis* principle for the patrilineal version of previous law and it abolished dual nationality partly to improve relations with

Southeast Asian states worried about the loyalty of overseas Chinese. Chen also discusses the pragmatic approach of the Chinese government in tackling issues of nationality arising from the transition of Hong Kong and Macau from colonies to special administrative regions of the PRC. The question of nationality is not simply a legal category: It entails rights and obligations, and a picture emerges of gradual moral progress in China's nationality law, though Chen suggests that the principle of the non-recognition of dual nationality may be out of date and that some form of dual nationality can be granted to citizens of other countries who are residents or permanent residents in China, regardless of ethnic or family heritage.

Max Ko-wu Huang, distinguished research fellow in the Institute of Modern History at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan, discusses the dilemmas of becoming Chinese in Taiwan. Huang shows that there was a consensus on "Chinese identity" during the rule of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo in Taiwan. However, a "Taiwan identity" gradually emerged in the 1980s as Taiwan democratized and set a different political model compared to mainland China. Today the majority of people in Taiwan support the ideal of "Taiwan nationhood" and "Chinese culturalists" who hope to maintain exchanges with mainland China eventually leading to a unified China find themselves in a minority. The political problem is that the large majority of people in mainland China regard Taiwan as a province and most countries still adhere to a "One China" principle that there is only one sovereign state under the name China, with the PRC serving as the sole legitimate government of China. There is no clear road map to resolve this political dilemma as both sides seem to grow further apart, with the younger generation in Taiwan increasingly affirming a separate identity.

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The idea of "Chineseness," according to Shuchen Xiang, professor of philosophy at Xidian University, should not be tied to family heritage or ethnicity or a particular political community. Rather, to be(come) Chinese means to be civilized and civilization means to exist in a relationship with the myriad things of the world and to embrace that totality, in contrast to traditional Western views that place European peoples on top of a permanent racial hierarchy. Xiang argues that Zhao Tingyang's idea of *tianxia* is similarly inclusive, and she draws a parallel with decolonial thinkers of the global south, who argue for a decolonialized, post-racial world that embraces and synthesizes world cultures. Similar to Ames' view, anybody can be, or become, Chinese, so long as they partake

of this cosmopolitan vision of human "becomings" who are shaped through interaction with other persons and cultures in the whole world. The ideal is to establish a harmonious political order on a global scale that respects and incorporates cultural difference.

Xiang's ideal might seem utopian at the global level, but it might provide some guidance for peaceful reunification of Taiwan with mainland China, given that the "Taiwan identity" seems to driven, at least partly, by fears of the political model in mainland China. If China affirms the ideal of harmony respectful of difference in its words and deeds (as opposed to harsh means employed to deal with dissent and cultural difference in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang), it will provide a more attractive "whirlpool" for the political incorporation of Taiwan.[9]

To be(come) a *good* Chinese, in short, it is not sufficient to have social relations. It means to show commitments to ideal forms of social relations: Family members need to show love for each other on a long-term basis, citizens need to care for the Chinese political community and its cultural achievements and be bound by legal ties that provide fair treatment to all, and Chinese people need to partake of a cosmopolitan vision of the world that respects cultural difference. The ideal, to say the least, is demanding, and none of our contributors say anything about potential trade-offs. What happens when commitments to the family, the country, and the world conflict in practice? Which commitment should have priority and how to minimize, if not resolve, points of conflict? These questions have preoccupied great thinkers in China's past, with Confucians, Mohists, Daoists, and Legalists offering different (and conflicting) answers, and perhaps only Zhao's suggestion of flexible and context dependent "Chinese" thinking can provide practical guidance for the future.

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4. A Way Forward?

Now I can interpret my dream. The other "students" who completed the exam are the contributors of this special issue on Chinese identity who provided fascinating insights. But the perspectives are limited, like the blind people feeling different parts of the elephant thinking they feel the whole animal (盲人摸象 *mangren mo xiang*). What's needed is a more complete picture: To be(come) fully Chinese means to partake of a relational worldview, to be sensitive to diverse aspects of "Chineseness" in history, and to be committed to the family, the country, and the world in

morally defensible ways. Not to mention that we need to explore many more perspectives on "Chineseness" not discussed in this special issue, drawing insights from literature, music, calligraphy, medicine, farming, and commerce in China. Perhaps even sage kings can't be "real" Chinese in the full sense of "Chineseness." But we still need more effort to pull together the different perspectives into a more complete picture and thinking of that task gave me the nightmare. It will definitely take more than one hour and fifteen minutes to answer the question of what it means to be or to become Chinese. More like a five-year plan. Not sure I can do it, but I hope readers of this special issue may be motivated to think further along these lines.[10]

Notes

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1 Joseph R. Levenson developed the historical argument that China was forced to transition from the idea of a culturally inclusive Confucian China to "modern" ideas of nationhood in response to the challenge of Western civilization, see https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;cc=acls;view=toc;idno=heb02384.0001.001; Tu Wei-ming developed the normative argument that "cultural Chineseness" can be attained regardless of ethnicity, see https://www.jstor.org/stable/20025372.

2 See, e.g., "A White Person Wrote 'Why Anyone Can Be Chinese,' And It's A Checklist In Privilege," https://www.huffpost.com/entry/daniel-bell-why-anyone-can-be-chinese_n_596d299be4b0b95f893d7634; "No, the white man behind 'Why Anyone Can Be Chinese' is not the 'Chinese Rachel Dolezal,'" https://racebaitr.com/2017/08/08/no-white-man-behind-anyone-can-chinese-not-chinese-rachel-dolezal/; "No, Not Anyone Can Be Asian," https://medium.com/@lynn4thewin/no-not-anyone-can-be-asian-7e19664c16b7; "I'm a zhongguo tong, dammit (and proud of it!)," http://shanghaisojourns.net/blog/2017/7/22/im-a-zhongguo-tong-dammit-and-proud-of-it; "Why Anyone Can Be White," https://medium.com/@nataliechang/why-anyone-can-be-white-3d941892b6cd. On a somewhat lighter note, Schwarzman Scholars at Tsinghua University established a satirical prize titled "The Daniel Bell Award for the Scholar Most Likely to Become Chinese" the year after my essay was published. The "winner" was Rachel Walker, an American composer who wrote her thesis (under my supervision) on the revival of traditional music in China.

3 For example, the Peking University historian Luo Xin uses the strolling method—he walked from Beijing to Shangdu (the summer capital of the Yuan Dynasty), commenting on the people he met and the historical sites along the way—as a way of discovering the changing meanings of Chineseness. See Luo

Xin, *Cong Dadu dao Shangdu: zai gudao shang chongxin faxian zhongguo* (From Dadu to Shangdu: Rediscovering China Along the Ancient Path) (Beijing: New Star Press, 2018).

4 With the exception of two articles by Yuri Pines and Wang Hui that could not be published here for copyright reasons.

5 Yuri Pines, "Ancient China," in *The Cambridge History of Nationhood and Nationalism*, eds. Cathie Carmichael, Matthew D'Auria, and Aviel Roshwald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 77. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the workshop "To Be(come) Chinese," 1 March, 2022. For an alternative view, the intellectual historian Ge Zhaoguang argues that there are five aspects of Han culture that since ancient times served as the mainstream and core of Chinese culture. See Ge Zhaoguang, *What Is China: Territory, Ethnicity, Culture, and History*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 95–98, 135–36.

6 Wang Hui, "Jinwen jingxue: dayitong lunshu yu qingwangchao de falu/zhidu duoyuan zhuyi" (New Text Studies, the Debates on Grand Unification, and the Legal and Institutional Pluralism of the Qing Dynasty Imperial System), article presented at the workshop "To Be(come) Chinese," 1 March 2022.

7 Zhang Feng's empirical analysis found that the early Ming's foreign relations with Korea, Japan, and Mongolia were motivated by expressive considerations in accordance with Confucian propriety about one-fifth of the time. See Zhang Feng, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 7, 177.

8 I thank Yuri Pines for this point.

9 Zhao Tingyang invokes the metaphor of the whirlpool to show how Chinese culture has incorporated neighboring cultures, but this metaphor may send the misleading message that smaller cultures will be completely "sucked" in the whirlpool. A better metaphor might be rivers that stream into an ocean, with the ocean incorporating aspects of rivers, especially at the meeting points.

10 I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft by our contributors, Zaijun Yuan, and an anonymous referee.

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