INTRODUCTION

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

Daniel A. Bell

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 baffllingly 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 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] 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!) four perspectives: A descriptive perspective, a historical perspective, a normative perspective, and a legal 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 Yuri Pines, Patricia Ebrey, Peter Bol, and Wang Hui discuss the changing perspectives on Chinese identity in history. Articles by Wang Pei, 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 (Huang), and/or the world (Xiang). Albert Chen's article discusses what it means to be(come) Chinese from a legal perspective. Some articles straddle between the different perspectives but we can use this four-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.

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 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?

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. 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.

Yuri Pines, Michael W. Lipson Professor of Chinese Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, argues that China's lengthy history was characterized by both inclusive and exclusive views of Chinese identity and that it is impossible to reduce this diversity to a single conceptualization of "Chineseness."[5] But there were different tendencies in different times. In the Spring and Autumn period, the Sino-alien dichotomy was typically viewed as a matter of adherence (or lack thereof) to Zhou ritual culture rather than fixed racial characteristics, thus allowing for the permeability of cultural boundaries between "Chinese" (then identified as *Xia* or *Huaxia*) and others. In the Warring States period, amid bitter political cleavages, some formerly "Chinese" (*Xia* or *Huaxia*) states were viewed by their rivals as the Other, whereas former aliens were, conversely, integrated into Sinitic states. Intellectually active men-of-service who roamed from state to state optimistically believed that aliens and Chinese alike would eventually be encompassed into a politically unified universal

state. After China's unification in 221 BCE, however, the encounter with the steppe nomads and repeated failures to lure the Xiongnu into the orbit of Chinese civilization led some statesmen and thinkers to conclude that nomads are inassimilable Others. Pines concludes that "in China it was not collective (national or otherwise) identity that determined politics; it was politics that determined one's collective identity."

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 the 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, Distinguished Professor in the Department of Chinese Literature and the Department of History at Tsinghua University, identifies a similar dynamic in the Qing dynasty. The "foreign" Manchu rulers employed both culturally inclusive and ethnically exclusive strategies to govern a multi-ethnic, multicultural empire that spanned a vast territory. On the one hand, the Manchu rulers affirmed "Manchu and Han are one" and sought to legitimize "minority rule" at home by emphasizing a purely cultural understanding of government with Confucian ritual and filial piety at its base and by restoring the legitimacy of the Confucian classics and literary Chinese in the imperial examinations. On the other hand, they enshrined the ethnic superiority of the Manchu in various policies and established a legal system that allowed for substantial cultural pluralism in the "periphery" as a way to expand and maintain their multi-ethnic empire. The minority-led dynasty had to continually adjust the political structure to deal with the conflicting demands of Confucian universalism and Manchu privilege.

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.[6] 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).[7] 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.

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.

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 part of the Chinese nation. But who is part of the Chinese nation is a matter of controversy. 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. 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.