THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-MAO CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late seventies represented a major change with the Maoist past. The new leader implemented the “revolutionary” Open Door policies, placing economic modernization at the center and setting the socialist ideology aside (Cummings 1979). Holding a very pragmatic perspective, Deng opened the country to capitalist forces and investments, seen as useful means to enhance economic development and raise the standard of living of Chinese citizens. Although this new course, allowed China to make impressive and outstanding economic advances, contributed to the fracture of the previous socialist national identity and consequently brought about problems for the justification and legitimation of the Communist regime.

According to the socio-economic transformations it can be noted how national identity has been renegotiated, reformulated and reconstructed over the past three decades (Watson 1992, Chan 1993). Whether national identity had been defined exclusively in socialist terms in opposition to capitalist and traditional culture, the late seventies saw the beginning of a revaluation of Confucianism and Chinese tradition. Grounded in the unique history of the continent and the cultural heritage of the heartland, a national identity with specific and distinctive “Chinese characteristics” has emerged. Confucian culture and tradition has come to constitute the distinctive ideational features which especially distinguish Chinese political identity from that of Western states.

This essay, instead of considering the bordered state sovereignties as the natural fulfillment of a destiny (Shapiro 1996), will challenge the assumption that a community with a predefined national identity precedes and subsequently conflates with the spatial state. Rather it will be argued that it is the other way around: the state comes before the nation. The political forces “imagine” a political community and attempt to construct a national bounded identity in juxtaposition to a dangerous “outside” in order to legitimize and justify the practices of the sovereign state and its constitution as the normal mode of subjectivity in world politics (Devetak 2005). Nevertheless the perfect alignment between national identity and territory of the state is never achieved: the representation of pure and homogeneous nation-states on the cartographical maps is contradicted by the presence of several marginalized identities within their territory –
ethnic minorities, refugees, indigenous people, migrants – and by the more frequent formation of transnational subjectivities in the globalized era (Adamson and Demetriou 2007). Holding this critical perspective, this essay will argue that the Confucian identity is not an essence that has always characterized the Chinese population in a totalizing manner. On the contrary it will be maintained that state officials supported the revaluation of Confucianism to provide the Chinese population with a distinctive national identity and subsequently oppose it to the Western system of values and customs.

The question is, for what purposes has Chinese national identity been constructed in the way that it has? How and why has this totalizing opposition between China and the West been asserted? This essay will argue that political identity has been rooted in the cultural heritage and history of the mainland to cope with the crises of the socialist identity and regime’s legitimacy following the implementation of the economic reforms in the Post-Mao era. Indeed since Marxist-Leninist ideology had been set aside, the national identity, defined exclusively in socialist terms, was fractured and the Communist regime, losing its ideological pillar, faced problems of justification. These domestic problems were worsened by the external influences that inundated China during the modernization process, in particular the flows of “dangerous” images and ideas coming from the West, such as the democratization of former socialist countries in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. Communist leaders have tried to justify the maintenance of the one-party rule on the basis of the specific historical and cultural conditions of the continent, the so called “special Chinese characteristics”. Thus the opposition between China and the West is functional to the Beijing’s projects of conservation of the Communist regime. State officials have especially underlined that China has a distinctive national identity that is “spiritually different” from an essentialized West (Ong 1997). Democracy and liberalism are considered Western ideologies and thereby deemed incompatible with Chinese national characteristics (Callahan 2006b:186). Hence the revival of Confucian ideology can be comprehended as a way to provide the people with a sort of national identity that would serve as a bulwark against the ideological impacts from the West following rapid economic development (Meissner 1999). Chinese policy-makers, in a “self-orientalizing” discourse, have challenged the ideology of eurocentric modernity (Western liberalism) by claiming a specific Chinese model of political and social organization that developed a different form of capitalism hinged on Confucian principles (Dirlik 1993, Dirlik and Zhang 2000). In this way Chinese leaders invoke a peculiar Chinese modernity, rejecting the natural and global evolution to liberal democracy envisaged by Fukuyama (Fukuyama 1989), thereby negatively dubbed “westernization”( Wang Renzhi 1990).
This essay will be structured as it follows. The first chapter it will analyze how essentialist works conceive the East/West opposition. It will be pointed out that these perspectives are based on a conservative notion of culture, as if there were an immutable “essence” of a people that constitutes the political identity. This would be problematic because it denies cultural exchanges and the continuous reinterpretations and renegotiations of tradition, presuming that the sense of Self of a political community relies on an idealized and unchanging local culture. In the second chapter it will be outlined how the main International Relations theories – realism, liberalism and constructivism – would explain the opposition between the identities of China and other “Western” countries like the United States, comparing the different conclusions. Following these analyses in the next two sections it will be especially criticized the state-centric approaches by claiming that the convenient assumption of perfect fit between national identity and state boundaries is out of date and needs to be deconstructed. The concept of diaspora would be a useful means to point out that states are not “territorial monoliths with unitary social identities” since the formation of transnational subjectivities is extremely relevant and more diffused in the globalized era (Adamson and Demetriou 2007). Due to constant external influences, identities are more frequently decoupled from the bounded territory. Indeed not only the diasporic communities living abroad but also all the individuals residing in the local “place” can be affected by transnational practices that put them in touch with distant others through new means of communication and transportation. These opportunities for new forms of affiliation produce cultural indeterminacy, hybridity and cosmopolitanism that conflict with the fixity and territoriality of the national identity assumed by state-centric approaches. As a consequence in an analysis among states the opposition between “us” and “them” is not so clear and definite as state-centric approaches would suppose. Thus, in the fifth chapter it will be pointed out that a coherent and homogeneous national identity is not a primordial thing but is a result of constant statist discourses and practices. Indeed a unitary “inside” is often constructed against a dangerous and threatening “outside”. Finally, in the last section, relying on these arguments this essay will focus on the analysis of the reconstruction of the Chinese national identity in post-Mao era underlining how the East/West juxtaposition is reproduced by Chinese leaders to reinforce regime security.
ESSENTIALIST REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

Essentialist works conceive political identity as a given that is possessed by a certain community sharing unitary physical and cultural traits. This political community has an essence based on a unchanging traditional culture that is embodied in all members. Every society is characterized by defined timeless features, a determined set of values, principles and ideas, that can be object of social and political analysis and explain their behaviors – for instance whether a community has peaceful orientations or is aggressive against another one – and the reasons for their economic successes or failures.

In the article “The Clash of Civilization?”, Samuel Huntington represented China as a Confucian state – its political identity is conceived as a primordial thing that “stretches back deep into history” – that develops conflictual relations with the liberal democratic societies of the West on the basis of their cultural differences (Huntington 1993). According to his view in the aftermath of the Fall of the Berlin Wall wars would not be fought anymore for ideological or economic reasons but new divisions and conflicts would be caused by cultural divergences (ibid.). Using an ahistorical and totalizing reasoning, Huntington regarded major civilizations – Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin-American and possibly African – as solid, coherent, neatly compartmentalized entities that are destined to clash along ancient “fault lines” (ibid.).

Presuming that the political identity is the natural reflection of a cultural essence of a certain community entails that there is homogeneity of subjectivities located in a territory. All the individuals of that society belong to that cultural background and conserve its distinctive characteristics. Indeed China is depicted as pure and coherent “enclave of identity” that is not affected by external influences (Shapiro in Callahan 2004:35). This essentialist perspective reproduces the stereotypical orientalist binary opposition between East and West, in which the Western foundational principles of freedom and human rights necessarily clashes against the Confucian and authoritarian values of the Chinese civilization. It is a mutually exclusive relationship in which the opposition is polar: it is either completely “East” or totally “West” (Callahan 1994). Multiplicity, ambiguities and indeterminacies of the identities that cross China disappear, depluralizing Chinese community into a solid Confucian entity (O Tuathail 1996). In this way the interactions and cultural exchanges are totally obscured: the Western imperialist practices of the 19th and 20th centuries in East Asia are dismissed and the circulation of cultural ideas, attitudes and practices through trade and conquest is denied (Ong 1999). This
epistemological framework that reaffirms this rigid opposition rooted in different immutable cultural tradition occludes the fact that the West has always been interlinked with the Orient as far as it has become an inextricable part of East Asia (Dirlik in Callahan 2006). In particular Marxism-Leninism and capitalism have had a significant impact on Chinese culture and the formation of Chinese subjectivities, showing how the representation of China as a homogeneous and stable Confucian state could be limitative. Nowadays it is particularly difficult to say what are “East” and “West” in a multiple space like China (Callahan 1994). Moreover conceiving a mutually exclusive relationship between Confucian and liberal ideas, Huntington excludes that a state can have a Confucian tradition and adopt liberal democracy. Thus the democratization of Taiwan is completely ignored.

In the article “An East Asian Development Model?”, Peter Berger maintained that the distinctive socio-cultural features associated with a Sinitic identity, being in striking contrast with those of the West, lead to a different form of capitalism. Berger questioned whether it was possible to link East Asian prosperity to the social and cultural traits that uniformly characterize the region (Berger 1988). Opposing Max Weber’s conclusions that Asian cultures and traditions are deeply uncongenial to modernization, he maintains that Confucian values – “a positive attitude to the affairs of this world, a sustained lifestyle of discipline and self-cultivation, respect for the authority, frugality, an overriding concern for stable family life” – can be considered as the keys to rapid economic development, a “comparative advantage” in relation to the West that experiences sluggish growth (ibid:7-8,11). Therefore, the immutable character of East Asia, with its values of collective solidarity and discipline totally juxtaposed to Western individualism, should explain the successes of this form of capitalism, then dubbed Confucian capitalism.

These works examining political identity as a primordial thing associated with the cultural essence of a certain community gloss over heterogeneity and exclude the impact of historic events and foreign influences on the continuous reinterpretation of the sense of self. The supposition that all Chinese people homogeneously are characterized by a Confucian idealized tradition is problematic. Not only are there many ethnic minorities with different traditions residing in China but also the Han Chinese people themselves, especially nowadays, do not possess a single and stable identity constituted by the distinctive features of the traditional culture, whether it be Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist. Their sense of self has been constantly changed according to historic events, which lead to a renegotiation and readaptation of traditional values to the present, and foreign influences. For instance the encounter with Western forces in the 19th century, the
adoption of socialism and more recently capitalism deeply affected the formation of new subjectivities. Especially since China opened its frontiers to the world, individuals have had many possibilities to associate contemporaneously with several cultures that not necessarily originated in the territory they inhabit. Indeed Chinese people are more cosmopolitan and constantly more influenced by consumerist and individualist lifestyles brought about by the opening to the market forces.

Hence nowadays identity has become multiple and fluid, inasmuch as it has a contingent and provisional nature affected by global cultural flows. These essentialist perspectives, conceiving the different political communities as coherent and stable cultural entities located in one territory, create polar oppositions that do not reflect the complexities of reality in the globalized era. Now, it is interesting to illustrate how main International Relations (IR) theories, realism, liberalism and constructivism explain the opposition between China and a Western country like the United States.

**THE OPPOSITION BETWEEN CHINA AND THE U.S. ACCORDING TO MAINSTREAM IR THEORIES**

Contrary to essentialist works, rationalist theories – realism and liberalism – do not pay too much attention to cultural arguments. From a realist point of view, national identity emerges as soon as there is sovereignty, the hierarchical political rule over a bounded territory that constitutes each state in an anarchical international system. Indeed neo-realists regard the absence of a global sovereign as the core characteristic of international relations. In a similar context the conflict is endemic and the state, the main unit of analysis, is mainly concerned by power and security (Donnelly 2005).

Hence national identity is deeply interrelated with the national interest which is never insulated from the relations of power (see Mearsheimer and Walt 2006). The national interest dictates the foreign policy of the state. Its decisions, positions and actions are to be taken without too much consideration of the ethics and domestic political system of other states, whether they are democratic governments or dictatorships. Thus realists like Mearsheimer and Walt, may point out that the U.S., a liberal democracy, aptly supported Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two authoritarian regimes, in order to protect its interests – security, stability and the regular flow of petroleum – in a strategic region of the world.
In the overarching condition of anarchy interests and security hinge on the distribution of material capabilities, strictly related to the size and inherent strength of states. The greater amount of power a country possesses, the easier it is to carry on the national interests. Especially without military force a state not only would not be able to defend itself but would also face serious limitations advancing its interests. Robert Art argued that diplomacy and not merely war rests on military strength inasmuch as its latent presence on the table of discussions – the capability to use force as last resort and threaten the opponent – gives diplomats the upper hand over other negotiators, making diplomacy effective (Art 2003).

Therefore the national interest is related to the amount of material capabilities of one country. The political identity of the state is conceived as a function of power. For instance according to its outstanding rise, China wants to be recognized as the dominant power in Asia and not as a second tier country, desiring that no countries acts without taking its interests into prime consideration (Bernstein and Munro 1997:19-20). Realists argues that China’s emergence will inevitably lead to a conflictual relation with the United States simply because Chinese ambitions of obtaining more influence in East Asia may undermine stability and the strong geo-economic interests that America has in the region (ibid.). Thus the opposition between Chinese and American identities is inevitable when two states possess a similar amount of material capabilities in the overarching context of anarchy.

Liberals, contrary to realists, maintain that an analysis of regime type can explain the behavior of states at the international level. In particular, proponents of the “democratic peace” thesis underline how democracies have a liberal identity that affects their foreign policy (see Russett 1996, Owen 1996, Doyle 1983). Democratic states are said to never wage a war against one another because they would be constrained by their own citizens that hold a leverage on national polity. As the liberal tradition that goes back to Kant and Locke points out, all individuals in all times sharing a harmony of interests – the pursuit of self-preservation and material well-being – tend to despise war for its costs and horrors. According to liberals conflicts would be restricted to those against authoritarian states, which are not accountable to their citizens and thus may be more aggressive, acting without any consideration of the interests of their own people.

Therefore a liberal perspective would explain the opposition between China and the U.S. identities on the basis of the different regime types: America is a liberal democratic state, China is an authoritarian regime. Tension and attrition may emerge inasmuch as Chinese leaders, not being monitored and sanctioned by their own citizens, may adopt disrespectful and belligerent
practices at the international level. Conversely a conflict would be excluded if China were
democratized. This conclusion can be seen in stark contrast with the realist tenets which highlight
the inevitability of a conflictual relationship between the two superpowers in the anarchical
context.

Constructivists criticize rationalists theories, pointing out that state identity is not
“exogeneous” to social interaction as it was previously assumed – for realists it is derivative of
material capabilities and for liberals it is constituted by regime type – but is “socially
constructed” (Reus-Smit 2005:192, Wendt 1995:71). This means that, in the rationalists
perspective, identities and interests have a material account and exist prior to entering society,
whereas for constructivists they are formed in relation to society.

The merit of constructivism is to show that states “act towards objects, including other states,
on the basis of the meaning that the objects have for them” (Wendt in Weldes et. 1999). Wendt
argued that shared knowledge and understandings define the social structures and affects the
nature of the actors’ relationships in international politics (Wendt 1995: 73). Cooperative and
conflictual interactions rely on the representation of the “self” and the perception of the “other”,
thus in one case, the security dilemma situation, intersubjective understandings may lead two
states to be really distrustful of each other and adopt self-help solutions, in the other, the security
community example, shared knowledge may induce two countries to trust one another and
resolve disputes without war (ibid.). According to this perspective the anarchical context of the
international relations is not necessarily conflictual, as realists argue, but “is what states make of
it” (Wendt 1992). Moreover as Wendt put it, “material capabilities as such explain nothing”, they
“acquire meaning for human action through the structure of the shared knowledge in which they
are embedded”(Wendt 1995:73). Hence, for instance nuclear weapons may be a source of threat
or not, depending on who holds them, an enemy or an ally.

In contrast with liberals views, constructivists argue that the centrality of democracy to state
identity is not a given but is to be defined in the mutually constitutive relations among states. This
means that the presence of democratic norms and institutions may not affect interstate practices
inasmuch as democracy is not always constitutive of identity among the so called liberal states.
Indeed other meanings in the intersubjective understandings may shape identity in a more
powerful way. Himadeep Muppidi, by pointing out that India and Pakistan fought each other
even when both countries were democracies, claims that the presence or absence of democracy
makes little difference in the battle over Kashmir since their dominant state identities are at odds
for other socio-cultural reasons (Muppidi 2001). On the contrary a relationship between an authoritarian and a liberal state may be peaceful because the absence of democracy in one state does not preclude that these two countries may develop a “shared knowledge” on other socio-cultural aspects.

Therefore the opposition between Chinese and American identity is to be understood through the analysis of the structure of the intersubjective understandings. China may regard its Confucian and peaceful “self” to be in deep contrast with the decadent and imperialist American “other”, the U.S. in turn may consider its liberal and efficient “self” to be in opposition to the bureaucratic and corrupt Chinese “other”. These mutual perceptions may be emphasized or softened by the continuous interstate practices. Thus identity is never fixed but always changing. To sum it up, the conflictual nature of Sino-American relations is not strictly determined by the different regime types as liberal proponents of the democratic peace may argue or by the distribution of material capabilities as realists may point out, but is mutually constituted in the social structure in which the two countries are embedded.

Contrary to liberals, who are very attentive to the different interests of individuals and underline pluralism at the domestic level, it can be noted how realism and mainstream constructivism, holding a state-centric view, conveniently assume that the state has a single and homogeneous national identity perfectly aligned with its territory. This supposition is based on a cartographical view of the world, which, as it is represented on the map, is carved up into coherent compartments of meaning. Nevertheless reality is characterized by hybridity and heterogeneity much more than the geopolitical maps may illustrate (O Tuathail 1996, O Tuathail and Dalby 1998).

China is far from being a homogeneous state. It is a country with a long and turbulent history, fast growing economy, rapidly changing social structure, and 1.3 billion people. There are fifty five minority nationalities officially recognized by the Communist Party but more than four hundred applied for the status (Dittmer and Kim 1993, Zhao Suisheng 1998). In the Western peripheral regions ethnic minorities have difficult relations with the centralized power, as it is exemplified by the irredentist movements in Tibet and in the Muslim majority region of Xingjiang. Hence the convenient assumption that China is a state with a single and coherent political identity grounded in its territory would leave out of consideration many marginalized people.
Heterogeneity is not represented only by the different ethnic groups residing within the Chinese frontiers. Nowadays national identity is not only embedded within the spatially defined state but more often also within transnational practices. Globalization and technological revolution have enabled the individual to be in contact with and influenced by people who do not live in the same community. Global flows lead to new possibilities and new forms of identification, allowing the formation of transnational subjectivities. State-centric views assuming that the state possesses a unitary and stable national identity synchronized with its allocated territory conveniently homogenize the current reality characterized by cultural indeterminacy, ambiguity and creolization.

Adamson and Demetriou (2007:493) criticized state-centric perspectives for their dated view of the relationship between identity and territory. They argued that “for mainstream realists and constructivists, states are still conceptualized as territorial monoliths with unitary social identities and there has been reluctance on the part of the mainstream constructivists (ex. Wendt) to actively deconstruct the state into various components. States are modeled as bearers of discrete homogeneous identities that are then projected onto a socially thin anarchic system. This model of states as possessing territorially defined unitary identities, however, fails to capture the complexity and diversity of identities that inhabit the larger social world within which states are embedded”. State-centric works, giving a unitary explanation of Chinese interests, identities and behaviors are problematic because in this way, as Zhang Xudong (1998:1) put it, “the object called ‘China’” may be “no more recognizable than the elephant being described by the blind men who happened to place their hands on different parts of the animal”.

A more flexible framework that resists the temptation to describe China with defined national features and underlines the complexities and ambiguities of the world in which this country is embedded is needed. Many critical works have deconstructed state-centric approaches and decoupled identity from territory, focusing on the formation of transnational subjectivities (Adamson and Demetriou 2007, Ong and Nonini 1997, Ong 1999, Callahan 2004). Relying on these critical works this essay will now present the concept of diaspora as a means to show how in modern societies subjectivities are multiple, fluid, contingent and disconnected from state boundaries. Too rigid frameworks like state-centric perspectives conceive stark identity oppositions not corresponding to creolization, cultural indeterminacy and cosmopolitanism of modern societies.
Diaspora: A Useful Concept to Analyse the Formation of Transnational Subjectivities

A perspective relying on diaspora mobilization would be very useful because it may shed some light on transnational processes of identity formation and show how identities are contested, contingent, fluid, multiple and thus better understood in “translation” (see Callahan 2004, Nonini and Ong 1998, Ong 1999, Adamson and Demetriou 2007). Diaspora refers to any population that has an origin different from the place where it resides and which retains close ties with its mother-land, made possible by recent advances of communication and transportation technologies (Adamson and Demetriou 2007, Hall 1992). Such deterritorialized people conserve the language, traditions and histories from the place of origin but living in a different country have to come to terms and relate with new cultures (Hall 1992). This does not entail simply assimilation to them or the loss of their identity and traditions altogether, rather their subjectivities are formed at one and the same time on several cultures, becoming hybrid and multicultural (Ibid.).

As Nonini and Ong (1997:24-25) analyzing Chinese diasporic mobilizations put it, “different identities – gender, race, nationality, subculture, dominant culture - intersect in and constitute an individual. A person is therefore a site of differences; someone can be simultaneously Indonesian, Chinese, working-class, and a mother, as well all of these together”. Callahan pointing out how one can be Chinese and Thai at the same time highlighted the usefulness of the diaspora narrative inasmuch as it constitutes a “heterotopia”, literally “another space” where multiplicity and incoherency are accepted in juxtaposition to the conventional utopian pursuit of a single and homogeneous identity that leads to rigid classification of Self and Other (Callahan 2004).

The concept of diaspora evidences how identities are “translated” (utilised in the etymological sense of “bearing across”), for the fact that these identity formations are deterritorialized and cut across state boundaries (Hall 1992). These transnational practices disconnect the geopolitical boundaries of the state from the symbolic boundaries of membership and belonging, rendering the state-centric assumption of the perfect fit between the bounded state and the national identity more problematic (Adamson and Demetriou 2007).

In the current period, an increasing number of people engage in transnational identity formation practices facilitated by global capital flows and new forms of communications and transportation (Davies 1993). Thus the constitution of transnational subjectivities is not restricted
to diasporic mobilizations. Nowadays all individuals, staying at their “place”, through new technological means may be connected to the “world” and be affected by cultures, lifestyles, behaviors other than the local ones. Identity becomes deterritorialized since it is no longer tied to territory, region or ethnicity (Callahan 2004:48). This argument is not to imply that the “place” is not important anymore in the formation of subjectivities, on the contrary it is still very relevant, but it is to say that identities instead of being pure, defined, singular, fixed, bounded within the frontiers of the nation-state, are multiple, indeterminate, ambiguous, contested, contingent and fluid. A deeper look at the globalization processes would evidence how individuals are shaped by global cultural flows.

NEW POSSIBILITIES AND NEW FORMS OF IDENTIFICATION IN THE GLOBALIZED ERA

Global capitalism and new forms of communication and transportation provided by technology revolution have made the uneasy fit between the state as administrative unit and the state as coherent and homogeneous political identity even more difficult and approximate (Adamason and Demetriou 2007:490). Globalization – referring to “those processes, operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organizations in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and in experience more interconnected” (McGrew in Hall 1992:299) – and technological advances have contributed to “weaken the ties of culture to place” and dislocate national cultural identities, leading to an ongoing process of “deterritorialization” (Tomlinson in Tamney and Chiang 2002:187; Hall 1992:299). Due to the new forms of transportation (i.e. the advent of steamship, the automobile, the airplane) and communication (i.e. fax, TV, internet and mobile phone) distances have been nullified allowing the entrance of global citizens in a new condition of “neighborliness” (Appadurai 1996: 29), and entailing more frequent contacts and exchanges with the world outside the state frontiers.

These changes separate the space from place. The space does not coincide anymore with the “place” which is the concrete, familiar bounded site where local and specific social practices formed and shaped the identities (Hall 1992:301). Subjectivity is not only affected by local encounters but also by the images, narratives and descriptions coming from distant regions. Now new technologies allow the space to go beyond the empirically known, personal and local “place”. Even poor people in a remote village in the Chinese countryside may receive messages, news, films of foreign lands like America and Europe through TV or a transistor radio. Gloria
Davies argued that television, providing “the possibility for each viewer to engage with “realities” far removed from his or her own immediate lived environment” leads to cultural dissemination, which means that the construction of “self” is not just characterized by the membership within a particular cultural formation – his or her community: family, peer group, colleagues or by extension provincial ties and nation – but also by “imagined relationship with the reality of the “soap opera” and with the simulacral image of the successful professional man or woman in the TV ad” (Davies 1993:4).

Hence “modernity”, as Anthony Giddens put it, “increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between ‘absent’ others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them” (Giddens in Hall 1992:302). Thus whether the “place” remains fixed, space can be crossed with increasingly rapidity through new technologies: it is the “annihilation of space through time” (Harvey in ibid.).

These deterritorializing effects associated with globalization appeared in China as soon as the country was opened to capitalist forces and investments. Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang pointed out how the affluence of media images and imports of popular culture in Post-Mao China enabled the audiences to identify themselves with “absent others”, the pop singers and film stars coming from Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, thereby becoming more cosmopolitan (Yang 1997). The opening to capitalism and mass consumer culture has created possibilities for new form of affiliation and interest and fascination for the outside world – i.e. a “leave-the-country fever” have stimulated the desires of large swathes of the audience (Ong 1999) – leading to the pluralization and deterritorialization of the Chinese identity (ibid.). Thus Yang argued that the implementation of the “open-door” economic policies started “the transnationalization of Chinese identity out of the confines of the state” (ibid: 296). Contrary to the state-centric perspectives and in contrast with the Huntington’s essentialist arguments, whether it is adopted a critical look on the socio-cultural transformations brought about by globalization, it can be noted that there is neither a unitary national identity nor an unchanging cultural essence but multiple “ways of being Chinese” that are not exclusively tied to the territory and contained in the cultural boundedness of the nationhood (Nonini and Ong 1997).

Globalization provides a variety of possibilities and new forms of identification, connecting the local to the global. The state spatialized identity is increasingly challenged by “global cultural flows” that affect the everyday life under many aspects. Arjun Appadurai conceived five
dimensions: ethnoscapes, characterized by the flows of people (tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers); technoscapes, the flows of technology (machineries, plants and components); financescapes, the flows of capital (currency market, stock exchanges); mediascapes, the repertoires of images and information produced and distributed by newspapers, magazines, television stations and film-production studios; ideoscapes, the flows of ideas, ideological images and terms comprised of elements of the Western Enlightenment world-view such as rights, welfare, freedom, sovereignty and democracy (Appadurai 1996:33-36).

Global cultural flows, which occur in disjuncture and in a non-isomorphic way (ibid.), produce transnational cultures, dubbed “third cultures” by Mike Featherstone to highlight the process of transformation and their orientation beyond national boundaries (Featherstone 1990). Cultural identities are not affected only by the lived environment and territorially bounded activities, thus are not fixed, closed and centered in an idealized immutable national tradition. Now global flows offer large varieties of possibilities and new form of identifications so that the sense of self is drawn on different cultural traditions at the same time (Hall 1992:310). Nowadays identity rather than being biologically given and fixed by natural categories and fundamentalist ethnicities, can be better understood as an effect of performative acts of affiliation (Callahan 2004:46).

According to these critical perspectives, globalization is not “the story of cultural homogenization” (Appadurai 1996:11) but leads to fragmentation and pluralization of identity. People do not possess a singular unified national identity but more and more often their subjectivities are informed by more than one culture. Thus societies are characterized by multiculturalism and ambiguity and states are not insulated compartments with homogeneous and defined features. This cultural indeterminacy cannot be comprehended by too rigid frameworks based on a binary logic (homogeneity/heterogeneity), conceiving that cultural identity either disappeared through assimilation due to global consumerism (McDonaldization) or on the contrary conserved its defined features without being affected at all by global cultural flows (see Dirlik 2001).

Indeed, whether heterogeneity has been emphasized differences are not merely between countries, which are not pure islands unaffected by the “outside”, but across countries since individuals may be influenced by global flows in a different degree. This approach does not negate that dissimilar social status and position imply a different degree of access to power, wealth and knowledge and different relationships to the forces of globalization. Elites certainly
have more possibilities and capabilities to get in contact with realities external to those of the immediate lived environment (for instance travelling, studying abroad, consuming, investing, trading etc.). Nonetheless it can be observed that nowadays very few people are completely excluded and unaffected by global flows.

Therefore it may be argued that in the global era of new possibilities and new forms of identification, in which “identity is constructed not by who you are or even where you are, but by what you do and who you associate with” (Callahan 2004:46), hybridity, creolization and cosmopolitanism are more and more diffused. As a consequence the local cannot be grasped without reference to the global in the local. Whether indigenous and global cultures coexist, exchange and mix, subjectivities are more complex, shifting, fragmented and at once specific yet global (Nonini and Ong 1997: 26). Thus clear and definite oppositions between homogeneous and unitary national identities – “we” against “them” – reproduced by state-centric approaches gloss over these diversities and ambiguities. In the contemporary condition of heterogeneity and cultural indeterminacy a view that conflates state and national identity is problematic inasmuch as it would represent an “imagined” homogeneity, failing “to capture the complexity of identities that inhabit the larger social world within which states are embedded” (Adamson and Demetriou 2007:493). Indeed in the globalized era, transnational and deterritorializing activities destabilize the paradigm of the sovereign state as the normal mode of international subjectivity conveniently held by state-centric perspectives. It is quite relevant to see how critical approaches to IR explain the construction of national identity.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The assumption that the sovereign state is the natural fulfillment of the destiny of a predefined national community understood as a single and homogeneous identity possessing its allocated territory has been challenged by several critical works (Campbell 1998, Shapiro and Alker 1996, Walker 1993, Anderson 1983, O Tuathail and Dalby 1998, Connolly 1991). Contrary to the so-called “primordialist” works, it has been argued that national identity would not exist were it not constructed by state officials through discourses and practices. In this way identity becomes the effect of state performativity (Devetak 2005).

A “primordialist” approach would maintain that an “essential” unchanging national identity undergirds the institution of the sovereign state. A predefined political community sharing some givens – such as language, religion, culture, sense of self – and thus consciously possessing its
collective identity naturally come to identify with the nation-state. This implies that there is a perfect synchronization between the nation and the state boundaries inasmuch as it is the national community that is the basis for the legitimacy of the sovereign state (Campbell 1998:11).

Critical works reverse this concept by claiming that the state more often than not precedes the nation. Political forces build the state around an “imagined community” and try to “persuade” the people living within the boundary of the state that they were one people, a nation. In this respect the national identity is not a primordial thing but is a “cultural artifact” represented textually, thus still contradictory and incomplete (Campbell 1998). The nation turns out to be the production of statist discourses and practices, the result of nation building as a political performance. As Shapiro put it, “the nation-state is scripted in ways that impose coherence on what is instead a series of fragmentary and arbitrary condition of historical assemblage” (Shapiro quoted in Callahan 2006:182).

Rather than considering state sovereignty as a natural thing, critical approaches, in particular postmodernism, problematize this concept, questioning how it has been constituted and justified as the primary mode of subjectivity in world politics (Devetak 2005). These aspects have been totally obscured by realism and mainstream constructivism which hold state-centric perspectives and assume that national identity is perfectly aligned with the territory of the state. State sovereignty has been asserted by constructing the nation where race, culture, identity and territory are coterminous. Nonetheless this statist ambition of a perfect fit between the territory and identity, nation and state, called by Derrida the “ontological norm” (ibid.), has been illustrated how could be precarious and contradictory, in particular in the globalized era, as it was explained in the past chapters.

Hence relying on these critical works it is quite relevant to analyze how the state is made to appear “as if it had an essence” through statecraft, the “performative enactment of various domestic and foreign policies” (ibid. 180). State officials constantly construct the national identity through discourses and practices. Since political identity is neither “fixed by nature” nor “given by God” (Campbell 1998, Clegg 1989), it is better to understand it as something constituted. Identity is always defined in relation to difference so that the sense of “Self” can be reinforced by the presence of the “Other”. Indeed, demarcated by the state boundaries, the “inside” differs from the “outside”, the “domestic” has to be distinguished from the “foreign”. Identity can be seen as the result of exclusionary performances, an effect of the enactment of various foreign policies.
In the book *Writing Security* David Campbell argued that state officials reproduce discourses of danger in order to secure national identity (Campbell 1998). Foreign policy, by differentiating the Self from the Other, serves to construct identity and demarcate it within the spatial frontier. As Campbell put it, “the state requires discourses of danger to provide new theology of truth about who and what “we” are by highlighting who or what “we” are not, and what “we” have to fear” (Campbell 1998:48). Since the perfect alignment between the national identity and state boundaries is never achieved and state has no identity apart from the various practices that constitute it, “this paradox inherent to its being renders the state in permanent need of reproduction and … always in a process of becoming”. Thus “the constant articulation of danger through foreign policy is not a threat to state’s identity or existence: it is its condition of possibility” (ibid:12).

The construction of national identity is realized not only by excluding an external Other, but in some cases it is even necessary to silence and repress internal dissent (Devetak 2005: 177). Sometimes the state resorts to violence to discipline, expel and contain an internal Other that endangers the conception of Self (Ibid.). Indeed nation-building is not a natural and primordial thing but entails costs of destruction or marginalization of indigenous people and ethnic minorities (Shapiro in Callahan 2006a:15). This can be observed in China: the frequent and violent accidents between Chinese army and the Tibetan and the Uyghur minorities in the peripheral provinces (Tibet and Xingjiang) are perfect examples. These active demonstrations of violence show that identity is not merely an upshot of the “productive power” of the discourses as especially post-structuralist maintain but is also an outcome of “compulsory power” of the state such as army and police as well (Barnett and Duvall 2005).

Nonetheless the perfect coevality between the nation and the state, especially in the contemporary globalized era which is characterized by an increasing amount of people engaging in transnational identity formation practices, is impossible to achieve. Indeed, the construction of a national identity homogeneously pervading the territory of the state is never complete, but remains precarious and shaky. To sum it up, as Devetak (2005:177-78) put it, “identity, it can be surmised, is an effect forged, on to one hand, by disciplinary practices which attempt to normalize a population, giving it a sense of unity and on the other, by exclusionary practices that attempt to secure the domestic identity through processes of spatial differentiation; various diplomatic, military and defense practices”; and expulsion “from the resultant domestic space”(of) “all that comes to be regarded as alien, foreign and dangerous”.

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Therefore relying on the argument that national identity is the result of statist constant “performativity” (ibid.:180), this essay maintains that in the post-Mao era Chinese leaders have tried to construct a unitary political identity rooted in the tradition and history of the mainland and totally juxtaposed to an essentialized West. At this point the main questions are, for what purposes the national identity has been articulated in this way? Why has traditional culture, which had been considered feudalistic since the proclamation of the Popular Republic of China (PRC), been revived?

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-MAO CHINA: AN ATTEMPT TO RESOLVE DOMESTIC POLITICAL PROBLEMS AND BUTTRESS THE SECURITY OF THE COMMUNIST REGIME?

Repudiated by political forces and elites for most of the twentieth century, traditional culture and especially Confucianism were revived with the official endorsement of the Communist Party from early eighties onwards. State officials have started claiming the uniqueness and splendor of tradition and history, which constitute the “Chinese special characteristics”, and underlining the importance of cultivation of the cultural heritage. Now native ideology was defining national identity with a distinctive character that distinguished it from the identity of any other state. China became “spiritually different” from the Western countries, their identities were totally juxtaposed.

It may be argued that the support of the “Confucian Renaissance” in the Dengist era may be related to the events that devastated China few years earlier. Indeed the terrible destruction of anything associated with the past during the Cultural Revolution may have aroused a sense of void in the population and consequently have prompted soul-searching (Waldron 1993). Waldron maintained that the demolition of the Great Wall and other important temples and monuments throughout China, may have deprived Chinese people of the national symbols with which they were identifying (ibid.). The fact that there was almost no material sign left of the Chinese ancient culture spurred a desire for restoration. Thus the positive attitude of state officials towards tradition can be seen as a temporary reaction to the excesses and errors of the Cultural Revolution, a way to define the present against a negative episode of the recent past.

This essay will argue that the Confucian revival can be better understood whether linked with the socio-economic transformations initiated in post-Mao China. The economic reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping contributed to the fragmentation of the national identity that up until then had been defined only in socialist terms. Moreover following rapid modernization the
country has inevitably been exposed to “global cultural flows” that enable the formation of new subjectivities more influenced by external cultures and ideas, thus deepening the crisis of the political identity and undermining the justification of the Communist regime since its ideological pillar was profoundly fractured. Hence it can be maintained that state officials tried to resolve these domestic problems by constructing a national identity grounded in the history and cultural heritage of the continent and thereby underlining the existence of “special Chinese characteristics”. In this way Chinese population possesses a political identity that is totally opposed to an essentialized Western one and the distinctive Chinese features are incompatible with “threatening” and “decadent” ideals such as democracy and liberalism, which are to be rejected.

Chinese national identity, firmly determined by socialism and defined by the territorial boundedness of the mainland, came under pressure when the country was opened up to capitalist forces and investments (Ong 1997). Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese reformers, regarding economic modernization as regime’s top priority and relying on the pragmatic “cat theory” – “a cat, whether black or white, is good as long as it can catch mice” – maintained that China could even use capitalism as long as it was conducive to economic development (Zhao Suisheng 2004:215). This new approach carried several relevant consequences in the Chinese socio-political society. Indeed the Chinese socialist identity, which had been specifically articulated against the “evil” capitalist Other during Mao’s leadership, was contradicted and going to be fractured. Deng tried to cope with this problem and eliminate any possible psychological and ideological obstacles by launching a campaign to “reassess” Maoism and justify the continuation of the economic reforms under the guide of the “Communist” Party (Zhao Suisheng 1998). Nevertheless, especially among intellectuals and students, the demise of ideology resulted in what Zhao Suisheng defined “the three belief crises”: crisis of faith in socialism, crisis of belief in Marxism and crisis of trust in the Party (Zhao Suisheng 1998:2).

The crisis of identity was worsened by the incredible influx of people, capital, investments, information and media images that “swamped” China from early eighties onwards. With the implementation of economic reforms China, which had been a self-sealed giant during the Maoist period, was opened to “global cultural flows” that have a pluralizing and deterritorializing effect on the formation of subjectivities. The same process of modernization that on one side allowed China to get access to science and technology and consequently boost its economic development, on the other exposed the country to “threatening” foreign influences that challenged the cultural
boundedness and fixity of the national identity and enabled the formation of transnational publics. Indeed an increasing number of people not only have had the opportunities to watch foreign films, listen to international music and identify with others coming from “outside”, like the Taiwanese pop stars, the Korean soap opera characters or the Hong Kong actors (Yang 1997, Davies 1993), but also have had the chances to get in touch and possibly embrace “dangerous” political ideas such as democracy and liberalism. Hence the uncontrollable flows of ideas and images deepened the crisis of national identity and provided the ideological basis to the formation of a pro-democracy movement that led to the subsequent Tiananmen demonstrations in spring 1989 (Zhao Suisheng 1998). As Gloria Davies (1993:5) put it, “the democracy movement is symptomatic of the crisis experienced by a society when the relative homogeneity imposed on political, economic and cultural practices by government collapses through the emergence of new networks formed by local, national and foreign interests”.

The communist leaders saw the regime security being undermined by the continuous exposure to foreign influences following the economic modernization. Moreover, the democratization of former socialist states in Eastern Europe could represent a dangerous example inasmuch as the Chinese population could demand the same kind of reforms by the Communist leaders. The maintenance of the regime could be explained only on the basis of different Chinese conditions. Indeed policy-makers elaborated the key concept of “Chinese special characteristics” (Zhongguo Tese) that could legitimize on the one hand Deng’s economic reforms and on the other the maintenance of the socialist system (Clausen 1998: 260). Due to Chinese distinctive features state officials could carry forward a specific form of “socialism”, opening to capitalism to boost economic development while still conserving the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), deemed indispensable. Chinese peculiarity was provided by its unique history and splendid culture that were “spiritually different” from the West (Ong 1997). As Li Ruihuan, a member of the CCP Politburo and one of the closest allies of Deng put it, “China’s national culture is long-standing, well-established, rich, profound and influential, occupying an extremely important position in the history of the world’s civilization. Our ancestors have bequeathed us extremely rich and extremely precious cultural legacy, which we should cherish, protect and explore”…(Hence) “the cultivation of socialist new culture with Chinese characteristics must be rooted in the rich culture of the Chinese nation. Carrying forward this national culture will provide us with an important condition to inspire national spirit, strengthen national dignity and confidence, display patriotic spirit and withstand all external pressure” (emphasis added, Li Ruihuan 1990: 19-21).
The justification of the CCP rule was now based on tradition and culture. Communist leaders accused the Tiananmen demonstrators of “advocating the total Westernization of China and ....negating the 5000 years’ history of Chinese civilization and of the whole nation (when they) finally walked down a road of preaching national nihilism and national betrayal” (Wang Renzhi 1990). Democracy and liberalism are “Western” and thus deemed incompatible with Chinese characteristics, alien to the very Chinese essence (Callahan 2005:186). Contrary to the constant attacks towards cultural heritage that characterized most of the 20th century – traditional culture was held responsible for China’s backwardness and incapability to cope with the challenges coming from the Western powers during the May Fourth movement (see Gong 1984) and regarded “feudalistic” and “evil” during the first three decades of Communist government (Dirlik 1995, Watson 1992) – Confucianism was revived and rehabilitated to provide China with a national identity that was “essentially” different from the Western one.

The promotion of the “Confucian Renaissance” can be related to the needs of the government to fill the ideological vacuum left by the decay of Marxism-Leninism and reject all foreign “dangerous” ideologies, particularly those coming from the “West”. Indeed it is quite significant to note how the revaluation of tradition coincides with the implementation of the economic reforms in the Dengist era.

The first Confucianism conference was organized in 1978 and the statist support for the Confucian revival became more visible and conspicuous with the foundation of the Confucian Research Institute, the establishment of the Academy of Chinese Culture and the inclusion of the Studies on Modern New Confucian Thought project into the national seventh five-year plan for social sciences in the following years. In this way the Chinese government created the basis for a great academic debate that produced a large amount of articles and publications in the second half of the eighties (see Xu Ben 1998, Li Hongyan 1997). The importance of revaluating traditional culture was officially confirmed in the Resolution on “Guiding Principles for Building a Socialist Society with an Advanced Culture and Ideology” adopted at the Sixth Plenary Session of the 12th Central Committee of the CCP in 1986 (Clausen 1998). This document called for a new culture “that incorporates the best from historical tradition” and then for “its ambition to inspire a sense of national pride, self-respect and self-confidence”(ibid.).

Confucianism, once portrayed as the “source of ten thousand evils” (Dirlik 1995), has now been revaluated as the essence of Chinese culture. In the words of the state official Gu Mu, Confucius was “the great thinker, educator and politician of ancient China” and indeed “the
founder of traditional Chinese culture” (Gu Mu quoted in Wei Liming 1989:17). In the numerous Confucian conferences intellectuals were underlining how “the characteristics of Chinese culture are in fact, the characteristics of the Confucian thought” and praising Confucianism for its determinant influence exercised on the values and customs of Chinese society (Song Xianlin 2003:86). Instead of being regarded as the “arch-enemy of China’s modernization and survival” like in the recent past (Hendrischke 1993: 2), Confucian thought now could be “a guide for the future” (Zhang Dainian quoted in Wei Liming 1989:18). Confucian ideals were also credited to have laid the basis for the national unification since they were advocating “harmonious relations between the Han and minority nationalities”(Bu Jinzhi in Ibid.). In addition to these praises for Confucianism, the Communist Party’s Secretary General at that time, Jiang Zemin, provided the most authoritative and significant endorsement of the Confucian revival when he attended a Confucian symposium and addressed the public by saying, “Confucius was one of the China’s great thinkers and his doctrine is part of China’s precious cultural heritage. We must thoroughly study his fine ideals and carry them into the future”(quoted in Wei Liming 1990:17). Jiang was even the first leader who frequently cited Confucian classics in official speeches, indeed a sign that remarks how traditional culture has been revaluated and readapted to the present (see Lau 2001).

Hence state officials have been trying to construct a Chineseness rooted in the cultural heritage and bounded in the territory of the mainland for their own political purposes. Contrary to essentialist representations, this essay does not regard the Confucian essence as a primordial thing always possessed by the Chinese population but conceives it as a result of the statist performances that make the state appear as if it had that essence (Devetak 2005:180). Instead of assuming the perfect alignment between a unitary and homogeneous national identity and state boundaries as has been done by state-centric approaches, this paper aims to point out that following modernization Chinese individuals have more often been engaging with economic, political and cultural activities that cutting across the boundaries of the nation-state decoupled their subjectivities from the fixed territory of China. Chinese subjectivities have increasingly become more cosmopolitan and multicultural, entailing that the bounded state is characterized by higher degrees of heterogeneity and hybridity. Nonetheless state officials articulating a unitary political identity linked with tradition and reproducing a clear and definite opposition between the Chinese national “Self” and the Western “Other” for their political purposes obscured the complexity and ambiguity of the contemporary condition affected by transnationalization and deterritorialization.
Indeed Confucianism, now depicted as the “the backbone of the great achievements of Chinese civilization” and “the mainstay of Chinese traditional culture” (Wang Gunwu 1996, Song Xianlin 2003), was revived because this ideology not only could provide Chinese people with a homogeneous national identity but could also serve as a bulwark against all threatening foreign influences coming from the West (Meissner 1999). Confucian values could be used as a traditional criteria for rejecting decadent and liberal western ideals, in the words of a leading sinologist, “now Confucianism, not Marxist revolutionary morality, is to guard the gates against Western decadence. Beijing’s pragmatic leaders are increasingly disposed to lean on a conservative version of Chinese tradition as the best guarantor of the status quo” (Theordore de Bary quoted in Zhao Suisheng 2004:228). Similarly in the essay “Confucianism and Deng’s China” Adrian Chan concluded that the “reinterpretations of Confucianism in the Deng era are not a matter of knowing the past” but are done according to the needs of the present (Chan 1993:23). “The reincarnation of Confucianism”, whose principles of social stability and respect of authority have been carefully selected, is performed “to provide the necessary legitimation for the political regime” (Ibid.).

The rigid division between China and the West has been especially demarcated by the Patriotic Education Programme, launched by government in early nineties to encourage nationalism, regarded as a useful ideology that could elicit a sense of unity and loyalty to the state and back up the regime (see Zheng Yongnian 1999, Wang Gunwu 1996, Zhao Suisheng 2004, and Clausen 1998). Patriotism, predicated on the basis of the cultural heritage and history, not only reasserted the uniqueness of the “splendid” and “long-standing traditional culture”, but also stressed the imperialist nature of Western powers by reviving the memory of the foreign aggressions on the Chinese territory in the past century, dubbed the “century of humiliations” (Callahan 2006b), and explaining contemporary interferences in the domestic affairs – the sabotage of the Chinese bid to host the Olympics in 2000, the condemnation of the China’s human rights record at the UN Human Rights Conference in consecutive years, the disagreements on China’s entry into the World Trade Organization – as deliberate attempts to block China’s rise (Yan Xuetong 2001). Recalling these historical and recent events state officials have created a sense of being besieged to arouse nationalist resentments among population and redirect protests from the internal issues towards the foreigner as the enemy (Zhao Suisheng 2004, Callahan 2006). Chen Xiaomei pointed out that the Chinese leaders, reutilizing the old orientalist binary opposition between East and West, have constructed the image of the evil Western Other, called
Therefore it was argued that state officials have revived Confucianism to forge a distinctive national identity spiritually different from an essentialized West. Underlining the “Chinese special characteristics”, the Communist leaders can reject western ideals like liberal democracy, defining them as incompatible with the Chinese system, and reassert the indispensability of the one-party rule regime. In self-orientalizing discursive practices, Chinese leaders decisively refuse the evolutionary path to liberal democracy predicted by Fukuyama, breaking with what they consider “eurocentric” ideals of the modern to claim a specific way of development based on native ideologies, the so called “Confucian capitalism” (see Bell and Chaibong 2003), and a distinctive Chinese modernity (Ong 1999, Dirlik 1993, Dirik and Zhang 2000). Indeed a Chinese model of political and social organization will develop and modernize the country according its Confucian principles of hierarchy, harmony and consensus, in total contrast with Western liberalism characterized by “moral decay”, “individualism” and “confrontation” (Burchill 2005:69).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay pointed out how Chinese leaders, in a self-orientalizing discourse, have reproduced the stereotypical and totalizing East/West opposition to deal with domestic issues: the reconstruction of a unitary national identity and the protection of the regime’s security. Following the implementation of the economic reforms and the decay of Marxist-Leninism and the Mao Zedong mode of thought, state officials began reviving the historical background and the native ideology of Confucianism to evoke a specific and distinctive Chinese essence in total juxtaposition to the West (Ong 1997). China is now characterized by unique and distinctive features that are spiritually different from and “incompatible” with the Western values of democracy and liberalism (Callahan 2006). Policy makers constantly highlight these “Chinese special characteristics” in order to exclude the adoption of “decadent” foreign ideals. Democratization and liberalism are said to westernize completely the country and negate the millenary history of Chinese civilization (Wang Renzhi 1990). Indeed Tiananmen demonstrators, invoking the constitution of a liberal system, were accused of “national nihilism and national betrayal” (ibid: 1990).
Through rehabilitating Confucianism, Chinese leaders could claim their own specific and successful model of development based on the traditional principles of hierarchy, harmony and consensus and refuse the ensemble of ideals tied to the Western Enlightenment that are generally deemed indispensable for modernization in liberal circles. Thus Confucian ideology could provide Chinese people with a national identity and protect the regime’s security, acting as a bulwark against all Western pressures following the economic reforms (Meissner 1999).

Nevertheless this essay showed how in the contemporary era, these statist efforts to construct a pure and distinctive national identity fixed within the state boundaries conflict with deterritorialization and hybridity brought about by globalization. A dense web of transnational flows and practices has affected large swathes of populations disconnecting their subjectivities from the territory and leading to cosmopolitanism, creolization and cultural indeterminacy. Following modernization an increasing number of Chinese people have been influenced by external cultures and lifestyles. Indeed there would not be a clear and definite opposition between the Chinese “Self” and the “Western” Other were it not articulated by Chinese state officials, who use exclusionary practices of spatial differentiation and foreign policy to give coherence to the national identity (Devetak 2005). In this essay it was maintained that especially in the current period it is problematic to think of a political identity as a cultural essence that “stretches back deep into history” (Huntington 1993). Essentialist perspectives, presuming the existence of solid cultural entities and conceiving a neat and polar East/West division as a natural consequence of the cultural differences obscures the relevance of the transnational flows and their pluralizing effects on the communities.

Other theoretical views were criticized as well. In particular it was underlined how state-centric approaches are quite counterproductive nowadays since they hold a dated view of the relationship between identity and territory. Mainstream constructivism, even if it has the merit to point out that identity is not a given but is “socially constructed” (Wendt 1995), like realism assumes that a unitary and coherent national identity is perfectly aligned with state boundaries (Adamson and Demetriou 2007). In this way these views do not capture the formation of transnational subjectivities and the complexity and ambiguity of the modern societies. Indeed there is not a homogeneous “we” pervading the territory of the state in contrast with an equally homogeneous “them”, but rather heterogeneity and multiculturalism.

Therefore in the contemporary condition of cultural indeterminacy and cosmopolitanism, Chinese leaders have attempted to forge a distinctive Chineseness in complete opposition to the
West for their own political purposes. The articulation of this neat division may carry negative consequences because it lays the basis for conflictual relations between China and the United States in the future, a scenario already predicted according to their different theoretical perspectives both by Huntington and the realists. Indeed this East/West juxtaposition proclaimed by Chinese state officials may lead to the deterioration of Sino-American relations and could provide eventual justification for conflicts. Thus this essay claims that it is very relevant to criticize essentialist and state-centric approaches and point out how hybridity and multiculturalism characterize our modern societies, underlining the fact that divisions are not so clean and definite as it has been conveniently asserted.

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