ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO AN INTERESTING MOVEMENT raged in the literary circles of urban China. Known as xungen, or “searching for roots,” the movement was launched mostly by young writers who for one reason or another felt the need to look for the source of their own cultural origins—and hence their creativity—in areas other than the political center as represented for over forty years by the Maoist ideology of the Chinese Communist party. What makes this “anticenter” movement politically provocative is the argument that the strands of Chinese culture have been so severely ruptured by the ideological campaigns of recent decades, and by the Cultural Revolution in particular, that the younger generation has been cut off from its cultural roots and must go in search of them. In an intriguing act of symbolic reversal, their quest has led most of the movement’s writers away from Beijing or other urban centers of political power into the remote countryside. Some of these regions they identify as their birthplaces, hence evoking an emotional feeling of nostalgia for their native land typical of most writers of this genre. For others, it came from their personal experience during the Cultural Revolution when as urban youth they had been sent “up to the hills and down to the countryside.” But the spiritual process of discovering their roots is nothing less than an epiphany, which they seek to capture artistically in their reinvented fictional landscape. The

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ancient myths and rituals they have uncovered invariably impart a
sense of grandeur and vitality against which the official Communist
ideology pales into insignificance. From the angle of this new vision,
the political peripheries are culturally richer than the center, which is
further divested of its previous aura by de-Maoification.

The intellectual impetus of this literary movement has also given
rise to a broader movement of “cultural self-reflection” (wenhua
fansi), a critical reexamination of all aspects of Chinese culture and
history. In both cases, the dissatisfaction stems directly from a
profound sense of disillusionment with the Cultural Revolution
which ironically reduced Chinese culture to rubble. It is out of this
sense of void that these writers, artists, and intellectuals feel
compelled to redefine their own culture as they seek to redefine them-
Selves: How to find a meaning of being Chinese other than what the
Party has defined for them?

The literary value of these new works has been affirmed by most
scholars as far superior to the spate of works produced under the
official Maoist brand of socialist realism, for these young writers,
influenced notably by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the South American
Nobel prize winner, have woven layers of myth into the tapestry of
reality through a more inventive use of language. Interestingly, none
of them considers himself or herself to be “traditionalist”; rather they
prefer the notions and techniques, however vague, of Western
modernism. This new form of modernist art in the service of
uncovering an ancient past again bespeaks an anticenter impulse.
One detects even an artistic animosity against the Han culture which,
as they see it, has been suffused with both feudal and current
authoritarianisms of Confucian and Communist ideology; its hege-
monic status fails to conceal its cultural atrophy.

Some of these writers are from minority origins, such as the
Moslem Zhang Chengzhi and the Tibetan Zhaxi Dawa. But they
nevertheless write in the majority language of baihua, like their fellow
Han writers. So the phenomenon is not one of minority rights or
linguistic pluralism but rather a new discourse on the meaning of
modern Chinese culture—a new dialogue initiated by a group of
self-disenfranchised young intellectuals who wish, so to speak, to
“decenter” the oppressive political culture of the Party. I have called
it a dialogue both as it is defined by the Russian theorist Mikhail
Bakhtin (in which a new language or a new genre interacts “dialog-
"On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse"

ically” with the established literary conventions, especially in the polyphonic structures of the novel), and as a way to delineate the contours of their own psychological makeup. The process of searching for roots, as enacted in fictional terms, also becomes a quest for identities. In a typical work, such as Han Shaogong’s story “The Homecoming” (Han comes from the “central” province of Hunan in the south—Chairman Mao’s birthplace—which he turns into a “periphery” landscape in his fiction), the “I” narrator, visiting a village for the first time, finds it vaguely familiar. He has, in reality, never been there before, but the villagers seem to recognize him and call him by another name. “All this seems familiar, yet strange too,” the narrator muses, “like a word you’ve been staring at for too long—now it looks right, now it doesn’t.” This identity confusion leads not merely to the narrator’s mental search for a fictional double (a familiar ploy in modern Western fiction); of greater importance, it points to the presence of an “Other,” not only another persona but an alternative realm that seems to convey a deeper meaning. One could also easily see traces of a “Peach Blossom Spring,” an ancient Shangri-la immortalized by the poet Tao Yuanming. But Han Shaogong is definitely not invoking an ancient ideal. In this and in his other stories both realms clearly exist in the present and the ravages of the Cultural Revolution loom heavily in the foreground.

What does this all mean to a novelist like Han, a leader in the xungen movement? In Han’s novelette, “Ba-Ba-Ba,” the protagonist is a mentally retarded boy whose entire vocabulary consists of two phrases—“Ba-Ba-Ba” (a child’s sound for father) and the expletive “f-- your mother!” Like the hero in Günter Grass’s The Tin Drum, the boy seems to utter a curse, an inarticulate j’accuse against the brutalities of his surroundings without, however, gaining any full consciousness of the situation. One prominent critic, Liu Zaifu, sees him as a latter-day descendant of Ah Q, the protagonist in the famous story by the most celebrated modern writer Lu Xun, who constructed this nameless figure during the May Fourth period in order to probe the more perplexing question of the modern Chinese “national character.” If Lu Xun reached a despairing conclusion some seventy years ago that Ah Q as a psychological prototype has no “soul” and hence no sense of individuality or selfhood, Han Shaogong’s more contemporary verdict is even more depressing: the boy not only
becomes, like Ah Q, a victim of his historical environment but is in fact never given a chance to articulate his desires.

If the boy were able finally to have a voice, he would be like another boy figure in the film Yellow Earth (produced during the heyday of the searching for roots movement) who, after a long silence, finally bursts out singing a ditty about the Dragon King urinating and creating a flood—to the surprise of the revolutionary cadre who visits this patch of yellow earth to collect folk songs. The film’s director, Chen Kaige, spent several months searching for a proper location for his film and discovered in northern Shaanxi what he thought to be the exact birthplace of the ancient Chinese civilization. The film’s ironic reference to the present situation is even more pointed: the present-day dwellers of this ancient site, the peasants that the Communist cadre encounters, are both unbearably impoverished and mysteriously silent. To try to help the boy and his sister find a voice, the cadre begins by teaching them revolutionary songs from Yan’an, with tragic consequences: the sister, awakened and “liberated,” wishes to join the departed cadre in the revolutionary headquarters on the other side of the river and is drowned in her journey.

The film, like Han Shaogong’s stories, raises the question of the Other voice—a true voice of the people that seems muffled and suppressed by the sound and the fury of the Communist Revolution. Beneath the veneer of a revolutionary mode, Chen Kaige seeks through an original technique of evoking a “visual silence” to carry on a dialogue with this more “mysterious” realm which lies dormant under its impoverished socioeconomic reality. In Chen’s film that dialogue is carried through songs. In Han’s “Homecoming,” the medium is words, words used in an archaic fashion by the villagers who seem to recognize the I narrator who, in turn, finds their words odd compared with the familiar modern vernacular. What then do these folk songs and archaic words signify? On one level, they represent the xungen artists’ affirmation of a vox populi that, in a sense, springs from the Chinese earth. On another level, the use of the modern Western ploy of a narrator in order to gain some deeper insight—a technique, incidentally, first used by Lu Xun—itself bespeaks an uncertainty, an indeterminateness about the true message of the people. If we bear in mind the somewhat ironic fact that most xungen writers come from urban centers, it is not surprising that they
too are strangers to these peripheral regions which they wish to uncover as authentic "centers" of Chinese civilization; the Other as the primordial source of their culture thus seems unfamiliar and even exotically "foreign." Herein lies their paradox: like exiles returning home after a long absence, they find the homeland of their own culture foreign, and the journey to their roots becomes one of increasing "defamiliarization."

However, what matters in this new cultural discourse is not so much its intellectual content as the mode of its inquiry. Whether this younger generation has attained any new insight about its own culture (in scholarly terms) remains to be seen, but one of the movement’s by-products is the emergence of an imaginary boundary between the familiar real world in which they live, which continues to be dominated by the ideologies emanating from the Party center—be it Maoist Revolutionary canon or the Four Modernizations, or Four Insistences, championed by the post-Mao leadership—and the unfamiliar Other world they imagine to have existed, whether it be a relatively remote region such as Tibet or Heilongjiang or the ancient sites of Han or Chu cultures (northern Shaanxi in Yellow Earth or western Hunan in Han Shaogong’s fiction). This imaginary boundary does not necessarily correspond to the official geographical boundary between center and periphery or the nationalistic boundary between Han and minority races. Yet by implication they raise new and profound questions about what it means to be a Chinese even inside China.

In intellectual terms, one consequence of the searching for roots movement is that it opens up the chasm between politics and culture. The impetus for cultural self-reflection has managed to stand on its head Mao’s famous dictum to put “politics in command.” This chasm is further widened by a generational gap between young and old, with the former expressing their cultural dissidence against the conservative orthodoxy of the older generations. These two broadening gaps have served further to separate society from the Party-controlled state. It is in the domains of society (if not “civil society”) that the young leaders of cultural dissidence have launched their purposefully “apolitical” assaults against Party authoritarianism while attempting to carve out new spaces for their artistic creativity. In this connection, their works describing exotic peripheries become in turn a symbolic “presence,” to reinforce as well as to demarcate
new boundaries. What we are witnessing is a phenomenon unlike any other since the establishment of the People’s Republic. The student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 dramatized this split, and although the Party state has reasserted its power by military suppression, the gap between state and society can no longer be bridged. This post-Tiananmen state of affairs has led to new configurations of intellectual power and a rethinking of the issues of cultural identity, especially among those Chinese intellectuals compelled to leave China as voluntary or involuntary exiles.

II

This new state of affairs inside China has brought me, as something of a voluntary exile situated forever on the fringes of China, somewhat closer to the homeland I left some forty years ago. I find myself strangely in tune with the young writers of the searching for roots movement on the mainland, though I would define my own search for roots differently.

The word *exile* in Chinese is often associated with negative or passive meanings—banishment as a form of punishment by government (*fangzhu, liufang*); seldom, if ever, does it connote the meaning of self-exile, or exile by voluntary choice as an act of protest by an individual. The closest equivalent in traditional China for voluntary self-exile is eremitism, or voluntary withdrawal from political service in order to maintain one’s own integrity or for the more practical reason of survival in times of great upheaval such as the change of dynasties. Often, however, an elegant way of seeking eremitism from the political center of power was, in fact, a return to one’s home region, to indulge in such cultural pursuits as art, literature, and scholarship. This stance, partly inspired by Daoism, formed a counterpart to the Confucian ethos of sociopolitical engagement. But it did not, in my opinion, constitute exile in all its implications of alienation and dislocation. In modern Chinese the phrase, *liuwang*, literally “wandering in escape,” comes perhaps closer to the dictionary definition of exile, prolonged separation from one’s country or home, as by force of circumstances. The phrase often refers to circumstances of war or famine, connoting almost the state of a refugee. In premodern China, in fact, given the Middle Kingdom syndrome, it was all but unimaginable, even as punishment, to be
exiled out of the country; rather, the faraway lands to which a criminal (and sometimes a guilty official) was banished were always on the peripheries of the nation’s power center—for instance, Xinjiang in the northwest or Hainan Island in the far south. In post-1949 China, the well-known region of banishment was Beidahuang (literally, “the great northern wilderness”) in Manchuria, where leading Party intellectuals castigated as rightists, men and women like the writer Ding Ling, spent years doing hard labor under miserable physical conditions. With hindsight, one may even consider the movement to send youths “downward to the countryside” during the Cultural Revolution as a collective form of banishment or internal exile.

In modern Chinese history, education abroad is a largely twentieth-century phenomenon. Waves of Chinese intellectuals first went to Japan at the turn of the century. They were followed by students seeking education in Europe and the United States in the early 1920s. By the end of the Second World War, the Chinese student population in the United States was sizable, their ranks soon being swelled by massive numbers of college graduates from Taiwan coming to pursue graduate education. This has been a well-documented, familiar story. Equally familiar, but not adequately analyzed, is the concomitant phenomenon of voluntary exile resulting from the majority of Chinese students choosing not to return to their home country. For an older generation of students abroad, this was certainly related to the watershed moment of 1949, when the triumph of the Communist Revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic presented them with a compelling choice. A great number, fired by patriotism, chose to return to serve the New China; even larger numbers chose, for one reason or another, to stay in their adopted country, in most cases, the United States. For younger generations of students from Taiwan, going abroad does not carry the same momentous trauma of choice. Still, it may entail other psychological consequences.

In an article written in English and published in 1976, the famed novelist from Taiwan Pai Hsien-yung (himself a self-exile now resident in America), characterizes such voluntary self-exiles as the “Wandering Chinese”:

Deprived of his cultural heritage, the Wandering Chinese has become a spiritual exile: Taiwan and the motherland are incommensurable. He
has to move on. Like Ulysses, he sets out on a journey across the ocean, but it is an endless journey, dark and without hope. The Rootless Man, therefore, is destined to become a perpetual wanderer. . . . The Chinese Wanderer yearns for the “lost kingdom,” for the cultural inheritance that has been denied him. . . . He is a sad man. He is sad because he has been driven out of Eden, dispossessed, disinherited, a spiritual orphan, burdened with a memory that carries the weight of 5,000 years.6

These depressing remarks are partially triggered by Pai’s reading of a novel by another writer, Yü Lihua, who first applied the then fashionable term, “rootless generation” to Chinese students, intellectuals, and professionals who had chosen to stay abroad. Yü’s popular work, Youjian zonglu (Again the Palm Trees), depicts such a person, a young professor who teaches elementary Chinese at an obscure American college (a Chinese version of Pnin, without the ironic touches of its master, Nabokov). The novel is a heavily sentimental account of his journey back to Taiwan, his “hunger for cultural identification,” his incessant nostalgia for the lost mainland, and his final mental debacle, being unable to find spiritual anchorage in Taiwan. The journey exemplifies the familiar truism: You can’t go home again.

Is the Wandering Chinese so spiritually dispossessed that he or she is utterly incapable of either rediscovering or (as the xungen writers have done) reinventing his roots? I may perhaps offer my own experience as a case study. When I first came to the United States as a graduate student some thirty years ago, the term exile never occurred to me, nor did the term émigré. The phrase which obsessed me during my first twenty years in the United States was identity crisis, defined, not only in Erikson’s terms as a psychological stage of youth in the human life cycle, but also as a matter of culture. Instead of feeling culturally deprived, I was more concerned about a self-perceived “threat” from the other side: was I becoming too Americanized, thereby losing my Chinese identity? My psychological confusion stemmed from a deep-seated ambivalence (perhaps even more acute than that of most of my contemporaries) toward the established forms of Chinese cultural practice at that time—a structure of conventional ethics and wisdom in the name of Confucianism with which I became profoundly disenchanted. This antitraditional frame of mind, curiously reminiscent of the familiar ideological stance of the May Fourth movement (which eventually became the
subject of my first scholarly pursuit), made the other May Fourth position, total Westernization, a distinctly viable alternative to forge a new identity as my American sojourn became lengthened into permanent residence.

However, as the years went by and I came to middle age, I outgrew this identity confusion. I realized that my sense of being Chinese, though it has undergone several subtle ideological transformations, is so deeply rooted that it practically rules out the possibility of total Westernization. This has not led me to return to Chinese cultural conservatism; I continue to find certain of the intellectual "temptations" from the West—particularly from Central and Eastern Europe—irresistible. Such a psychological state is by no means uncommon among exiled Chinese in the United States, but it has not been fully articulated as an issue beyond the parameters of what is known as Chinese-American ethnic or minority discourse. Simply put, I would call this stance Chinese cosmopolitanism—a loose epithet, but one that embraces both a fundamental intellectual commitment to Chinese culture and a multicultural receptivity, which effectively cuts across all conventional national boundaries. It is, in other words, a purposefully marginal discourse, intended to recontextualize the margins.

My emotional affinity with the Wandering Chinese and the xungen writers lies, of course, in a shared self-perception of marginality, except that my marginality has a double edge vis-à-vis the centers of both China and America. On the peripheries of both countries, I feel compelled to engage actively in a dialogue with both cultures. Perhaps it was this perceived need for intellectual engagement that saved me from feeling totally "lost" between two continents, like the protagonist of *Again the Palm Trees*.

The one novel that most vividly dramatizes this double dialogue is Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry Green and Peach Red* (*Sangqing yu tao-hong*, translated into English as *Two Women of China*), discussed by Pai Hsien-yung as providing an example of the Wandering Chinese syndrome. In this novel, written in high-modernist style, the two personas—divided selves—of the same protagonist address her dual marginal fate. As Peach Red narrates her recent journey as an exile in America in a series of letters to the American immigration officer, her former self, Mulberry Green, confronts a much larger historical experience of modern China—her move from central
China to Taiwan (and, as Peach Red, to America). This tortured double journey infuses the novel with tremendous psychological power. Its prevailing pathos comes from an author equally committed to—and troubled by—both cultures “from the margins.” Through a purposeful schizophrenic split of the two contrasting personalities, the author has not only described a heightened case of identity confusion but has located a special angle from which to decipher—and in a way to deconstruct—the master narrative of modern Chinese history. In doing so, the novel gives new meaning to being a self-exiled Chinese on the peripheries.

In the double frame of the novel, it is precisely Peach Red’s tormented and anxiety-ridden outcry about her exiled existence on the edge of American society that compels her alter ego, Mulberry Green, to encompass the entire historical span of her personal past. In other words, it is her newly acquired American side—and the need to explain why she is in America—that forces her Chinese side to be engaged in a search for meaning through her personal journey in Chinese history. That journey, in both geographical and symbolic terms, is also a journey of chaos and fragmentation in which the protagonist invariably finds herself escaping from an endangered center. The beginning of the novel—set in wartime China (1945)—finds Mulberry Green as a young girl of sixteen who has just escaped from home only to join up with a boat full of refugees fleeing from the Japanese. The second part has her trapped in and then escaping from the besieged city of Peking in 1949, before the impending entrance of the Communists. In the third part of the novel, the setting shifts to Taipei, a peripheral city in the eyes of mainland refugees which became the new political center of the evacuated Kuomintang in Taiwan. Here Mulberry Green, her husband, and her daughter are locked in an attic which, according to one critic, “is highly symbolic of the island itself.” In addition to suffering from claustrophobia and temporal disjunction, they are being hunted by the police on charges of embezzlement of government money.

Only after Mulberry Green reaches the end of her journey to the periphery as she arrives in America is she able to recall her past experience in China. At the same time she rejects this old “historical” self by assuming a new name and identity, Peach Red. The most harrowing part of the novel concerns the escapades of Peach Red as she is hunted down by the US immigration officers. Her identity
confusion takes the form of both schizophrenia and nymphomania as she sleeps her way from man to man across the continental United States. Her rejection of Mulberry Green, the Chinese side of herself, plunges her into a state of “moral and sexual anarchy” which, according to Pai Hsien-yung, may be also “representative of the macrocosmic disorder of an entire nation”—China.\(^9\) Peach Red’s fragmented psyche is a reflection of her own confusion as an exile and of the historical fragmentation of her past experiences in China. Pai considers the novel an allegorical tale because it evokes the fate of the prototypical Chinese exile who, as a Wandering Chinese, becomes “eternally terrified, eternally uncertain, eternally on the run,” because “this physical uprooting means also the spiritual dislocation.”\(^10\)

Unlike Nieh’s emotionally disturbed Peach Red, I now realize, after more than twenty years of identity confusion, that the journey of exile need not be utterly traumatic, dark, and without hope. On the contrary, it is only on this marginal ground that I feel psychologically secure and even culturally privileged. By virtue of my self-chosen marginality I can never fully identify myself with any center. Thus, I do not feel any compelling need to search for my roots. I believe that the aimless anguish of Peach Red stems from the anxiety of loss and an inability to anchor her new identity on the margins of American society and culture. The feeling of self-torment, perhaps representing the negative side of a bicultural marginal person, can be turned into a positive character strength. Hualing Nieh’s most recent work—a large-scale historical romance entitled, \textit{Qianshan wai shui changliu} (\textit{Beyond the Myriad Mountains Flows the River}) in which a young girl of an interracial marriage arrives in America in search of her American roots—presents a more affirmative tone which embraces the values of both cultures and replaces the nihilistic mood of \textit{Two Women of China}. I would also argue that even the \textit{xungen} writers’s search for roots stems from a psychological need for an alternative center. To that extent, their discourse is still within reach of the center no matter how much they wish to embrace the culture of the peripheries. Total freedom from such a centrist orientation should be both the privilege and the prerogative of a truly “peripheral” writer, a literary exile who chooses to be “unbounded” by his or her homeland.

The fact of the matter is often to the contrary: exiled writers, within their own communities or ghettos in their adopted country,
tend to reproduce narrow facsimiles of the same habits and ways of thinking that they brought from their homeland. According to Joseph Brodsky, the Soviet poet in exile, this signifies the exile writer’s peculiar vanity to retain his past—a desperate wish not to be forgotten by the homeland. My attitude toward exile writers is perhaps more charitable because I can easily understand the reasons for this misplaced obsession, especially among Chinese writers whose “obsession with China” has been something of a moral burden. It is an obsession that privileges China’s problems as uniquely Chinese which lay absolute claim to the loyalty of Chinese in all parts of the world. This omniscient nationalism, easily capitalized upon by every Chinese government to legitimize itself at the center, has so dominated the literary imaginations of modern Chinese everywhere that it is virtually impossible to imagine a Joseph Brodsky who writes in both his native language and the language of his adopted country in order to create an art that transcends national boundaries. When one thinks of some notable examples produced by Chinese exiles in the United States in addition to Hualing Nieh and Yü Lihua—Pai Hsien-yung’s own collection of fiction, Niuyue ke (New Yorkers), and the post-Cultural Revolution writings of Ch’en Jo-hsi, for instance—emotional attachment to the homeland seems like an “unbroken chain.” In the last two or three years a new subgenre has crept into mainland Chinese writing, following in the footsteps of exile writers from Taiwan: liuxuesheng wenxue (literature of Chinese students abroad) in which both author and subject are in America but the language remains Chinese and the work is published in mainland Chinese journals. Again the stories take place, as in real life, in the Chinese communities; American culture and characters make only an occasional, peripheral appearance. Needless to say, the Chinese characters’ obsessions continue to be with China.

This excessive obsession with their homeland has deprived Chinese writers abroad of their rare privilege of being truly on the periphery. In my view, only by being on the true periphery of China—that is, overseas—can they hope to rise above it, because a true peripheral perspective affords them a distance sufficiently removed from the center of the obsessions so that they can subject the obsession itself to artistic treatment. This can be done by turning this perspective into a new form of fantasy or mythology, as is the case in the work of the Jewish-Polish writer Isaac Singer (who lived mostly in New York) or
On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse

it can be turned into a kind of philosophical, metafictional discourse, as Thomas Mann did when he created his version of *Doktor Faustus* while an exile in southern California. The most recent example would be the Indian-English writer Salman Rushdie (now in hiding in England), whose controversial novel, *The Satanic Verses*, subjects an entire religious tradition to an elaborate, postmodernist satire. The boundaries are again not so much geographical as intellectual and psychological.

III

These (somewhat idle and diverse) meditations on the meaning of being an exile have been triggered, ironically, by my association with a number of Chinese intellectuals and writers who left China partly as a result of the Tiananmen incident. In reflecting critically upon the cultural activities and discourses that they had initiated or helped to promote in China—including the search for roots movement—they were struck by a notable lack of peripheral thinking, because for several years they had been at the center of a cultural movement that exerted great impact on urban intellectual society. For all its implications of breaking up the Party’s monolithic hold on creative culture, the movement has not entirely changed their “centrist” frame of mind—the elitist belief that they can ultimately influence the reformist leaders in the Party to their way of thinking.

No longer at the center of action (and in a sense the failure of the student demonstrations signaled the failure of hasty action) these writers are turning inward to matters of thought and psyche. They are beginning to reflect actively on the internal ravages caused by the Cultural Revolution—the impact of the Maoist revolution on their individual souls. They have invented a number of metaphors in order to describe a situation for which their old language seems inadequate. The hegemony of the “official talk” has created “a prison-house of a language” which has “subjugated the soul.” After repeated political campaigns in which they were ordered to “surrender their hearts” (*jiaoxin*) to Chairman Mao and the Party, they have no heart left—they have almost no inner resources with which to fortify their sense of self and to justify their individual existences, much less their dignity as human beings. The first step toward a reconstruction of the self has led them to the writings of Václav Havel in order to reaffirm
what Havel has called “human identity” and the individual will to “live in truth.” In a way, the elitist agenda of the Chinese intellectuals offers a sharp contrast to Havel’s nonelitist philosophy of “small-scale work” starting from the “everyday, thankless and never ending struggle of human beings to live more freely, truthfully and in quiet dignity.”13 Beginning from this mundane baseline, Havel’s movement built up great momentum which shook the entire Czech society and finally led his “Charter 77” group to power—a journey, so to speak, from the periphery to the center.

Havel’s emphasis on everyday life derives from the post-Enlightenment tradition in the West which began to place a high premium on the quality of life defined within the axis of bourgeois marriage and family. Concomitant with it is the well-known valorization of individual privacy which forms the precondition for what the Czech intellectuals would call internal exile—the voluntary act of individuals to keep a private mental space which is immune from the power influence of the state. But the mentality of internal exile embraces a more activist ethos than the negative freedom of the right to privacy: it is a state of mind created willfully by an individual to resist pressures from the outside. To that extent it becomes a value like freedom. Coming from a tradition in which voluntary self-exile hardly existed (except as eremetic withdrawal), it is understandable that the concept of internal exile was initially baffling to my newly arrived colleagues from China. At the same time they found it appealing because, I suspect, it fills a certain psychological gap by suggesting an alternative form of individual resistance to a far stronger central power than that which Havel confronted. Internal exile does not mean physical banishment to the peripheries of the country but rather to turn inward—the construction of a sanctuary of the soul that stands in a peripheral position vis-à-vis the omnipotent center.

Is it possible, then, to internalize the xungen movement by conducting a search for the roots of Chinese culture in the abode of an exile’s soul? In trying to answer this question, I am reminded of Josef Škvorecký, a self-exiled Czech writer now living in Canada who wrote about Bohemia in an article for a recent issue of Daedalus: “I love her soul, which is in her culture. And that is in exile with me. That is my loyalty. . . . That has always been the loyalty of exiles.
Only tyrants stress geographical patriotism.” Škvorecký also quotes these lines from the nineteenth-century Slovak poet Jan Kollar:

Do not give the holy name of homeland
To the country where we live.
The true homeland we carry in our hearts,
And that cannot be oppressed or stolen from us.

These words carry a timely resonance not only to perennial self-exiles like myself but also to those Chinese intellectuals who left their homeland because of the Tiananmen massacre. For the first time, nation and state become separate entities in their minds: it is the Chinese nation, instead of the state, that remains the central object of their loyalty—their motherland. In this regard, their thinking corresponds closely with that of their fellow intellectuals inside China, and offers an amazing parallel to the situation of Central and Eastern European nations before 1989. In the memorable words of Leszek Kolakowski (an eminent self-exile from Poland), “the split between the State, which people feel is not theirs, though it claims to be their owner, and the motherland, of which they are guardians, has reduced them to an ambitious status of half-exiles.”

It is this new self-awareness of being “half-exiles” that has led Chinese intellectuals from the People’s Republic to reexamine their current situation in an international context of cultural exile and cultural migration. Here they are confronted for the first time with the familiar twentieth-century phenomenon of the “intellectual in exile” which, according to Kolakowski, can indeed “boast an impressive spiritual pedigree” in the Western traditions. In fact, Kolakowski considers exile to be “the normal and inescapable lot of mankind on earth” and finds the myth of exile not only in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition but in all religions: “The fundamental message embedded in religious worship is: our home is elsewhere.” Echoing essentially the same view, the young Chinese scholar Liu Xiaofeng, now studying theology in Switzerland, published recently a learned article entitled “Exile Discourse and Ideology” in which he juxtaposes the “homeless discourse” of exile and the “homed discourse” of authoritarian regimes and finds that somehow in this century the former has been invariably associated with “the knowledge-value discourse called socialism.” Liu singles out, in particular, the year 1922 when
the new Soviet regime suddenly arrested and then exiled some 120 leading Russian scholars, writers, and scientists, thus marking the first massive intellectual migration (followed by the exodus of Jewish and other European intellectuals to America during the Nazi era and that of the East Europeans in the 1950s and 1960s). The post-Tiananmen exodus of Chinese intellectuals seems to complete this twentieth-century picture.

It is widely known that the European intellectual migrations exerted a powerful cultural impact on the countries of their resettlement. At the same time, a reverse impact—that of the diasporas on the homeland—has also taken place, especially when mutual communication is possible (such as between Jewish communities abroad and in Israel). Even in the case of East European countries before 1989, outside émigrés had always maintained contact with semiexiles inside through underground or unofficial channels to help create a powerful counterculture opposed to official ideology. Since 1989 many exiles have returned to assume key government positions or otherwise participate in the political transformation from the post-totalitarian systems to democracy. But the phenomenon of Chinese intellectual migration and its possible contribution to both the homeland and their adopted country is somewhat more complicated by the existence since 1949 of two rival regimes in two separate territories. Contending loyalties have tended to splinter overseas Chinese populations. It is only during the most recent decade, as mainland China and Taiwan resumed unofficial contact and Hong Kong emerged as an intermediary zone with a pressing future (its formal “return to the motherland” in 1997), that a different configuration of relations—and a different perspective on the problem of center and periphery—has become possible.

IV

In his classic essay titled “Center and Periphery,” Edward Shils defined the center not as a spatial location but as a central zone of symbols, values, and beliefs which govern a society.19

The existence of a central value system rests, in a fundamental way, on the need which human beings have for incorporating into something which transcends and transfigures their concrete individual existence.
On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse

They have a need to be in contact with symbols of an order which is larger in its dimensions than their own bodies and more central in the ultimate structure of reality than is their routine everyday life.20

It would seem that this consensus model has the opposite implication when compared with Havel's ideas, and the symbols of a larger order could easily be construed as ideology, which Havel calls "a specious way of relating to the world. . . . As the repository of something 'supra-personal' and objective, it enables people to deceive their conscience and conceal their true position and their inglorious modus vivendi, both from the world and from themselves."21 However, Shils's set of values corresponds to ideology only in Mannheim's sense; he is careful to differentiate his concept from the specious and "supertranscendent" ideologies (utopias in Mannheim's formulation) "which are explicit, articulated, and hostile to the existing order" such as Bolshevism, National Socialism, and Fascism.22 Thus, it would seem that they are in basic agreement about the utopian excesses of ideology—in Havel's case, of an ideology in the service of a post-totalitarian system. Both men stress the need of human individuals to be "in personal communion" with one another once they have "reached a certain level of individuation."23

Still, in a fundamental way, the consensus model—which emphasizes the necessity of an established center and (despite tensions) its beneficial incorporation of either rebellious individuals or the mass population on the peripheries of a society through the process of modernization—remains suspicious. Havel has vividly described the frightening, anonymous power of the inhuman automatized systems found in both post-totalitarian and capitalist countries. In the case of post-Tiananmen China, the political scene clearly manifests the symptoms of an emergent post-totalitarian system in which control no longer comes from charisma (Maoism, for example) but from a central authority wielding anonymous power. What is to be done—even for those who, as Shils perceptively puts it, "have a very intense and active connection with the center, with the symbols of the central value system, but whose connection is passionately negative"?24 The xungen writers have offered one alternative solution, by reinventing new centers on the peripheries. But even this reinvention has already split open the Maoist model of a popular consensus: it has "relativized" the significance of one center and paved the way for cultural pluralism.
In fact, the statement by Han Shaogong, one of the leading xungen writers, already intimated such a pluralism. He has argued that the orthodox Han-Chinese culture is merely a dead “crust” resting on the “hot and turbulent” seedbed of a mixture of several unorthodox ethnic cultures, and it can only be revitalized if it is able to absorb the magma of these unorthodox cultures. In Han’s view the search for roots is not a search for lost purity but rather an attempt to uncover the vital pluralism of this cultural hybrid. To rephrase Han’s point further, it is clear that in Chinese history orthodoxy is to be found in the center, whereas heterodoxy is to be found in the peripheries.

To render Han’s argument in a different way, it celebrates the unorthodox cosmopolitanism which he has found in China’s cultural past and contrasts it with the monolithic orthodoxy of present-day Chinese culture. The argument is not novel—the culture of the Tang dynasty comes readily to mind as a shining example of ancient cosmopolitanism. But its relevance to the contemporary world increases when the boundaries of the periphery extend to areas beyond the China coast. The prosperity of the Four Dragons may be used as an argument for the continuing influence of Confucianism. But I would rather see it as a continuation of a littoral vitality begun in the early nineteenth century, when new initiatives often originated from coastal reformers (with a mixed cultural background such as the journalist-entrepreneur Wang Tao) which then became legitimized as policy by the hinterland center. In the late twentieth century, this littoral zone has expanded to include two powerful new centers, Taiwan and Hong Kong, whose economic supremacy over the mainland is also changing the cultural map of China. What Wei-ming Tu conceptualizes as the three Chinese cultural “universes” makes increasing sense as the old national argument, based on territorial and ideological grounds, of a single China represented by a single government gradually loses its relevance. With increased influence from such central littoral regions, it is not unlikely that the more prosperous parts of China—the coastal cities on the lower Yangtze River and in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong—will become part of the economic system dominated by Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the same time, what is known as the Pacific Rim has become increasingly internationalized as a large region of intermingling economies and cultures—both ancient and modern, Asian and Western. In this transnational and cosmopolitan framework, the old
On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse

spatial matrix of center and periphery no longer has much validity. Even the notions of exile will have to be redefined. As we cast our gaze across the Pacific ocean toward the future, perhaps Chinese of all regions and communities may take comfort in the vision that their boundaries will no longer close them off but instead crisscross each other to form interlocking networks in which there is no single center.

ENDNOTES


2 For a sampling of these stories, see Jeanne Tai, ed., Spring Bamboo: A Collection of Contemporary Chinese Short Stories (New York: Random House, 1989); see also my Introduction, xi–xii.


4 Ibid., 22.

5 Han Shaogong, Youhuo (Temptation), (Hunan: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1986). The collection includes both “Homecoming” (Guiqulai) and “Ba-Ba-Ba.”


8 Pai, 211.

9 Ibid., 212.

10 Ibid.


12 An excellent example of this new genre is a short story by Zha Jianying, “Xiangei luosha he qiao de anhunqu” (Requiem for Rosa and Joe), Renmin wensxue (People’s literature), (3) (1989). In this story the peripheral existence of an old American couple assumes central symbolic significance in the meaningless life of a young Chinese woman exiled in New York.


15 Ibid., 132.
226  Leo Ou-fan Lee


17Ibid., 57.


20Ibid., 7.

21Havel, 42.

22Shils, 5.

23Ibid., 7.

24Ibid., 8–9.


26In Chinese studies, the notion of reform as a “littoral” initiative acting upon the “hinterland” was first developed by Paul A. Cohen in Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T’ao and Reform in Late Ch’ing China (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), chap. 1.

27See Tu Wei-ming’s essay in this issue.