Is “New Culture” a Proper Translation of *Xin wenhua*? Some Critical Remarks on a Long-Overlooked Dilemma

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Abstract

For several decades, we have been witnessing a profound renewal in our understanding of the “New Culture Movement”. However, the aptness of “new culture” as a proper translation for *xin wenhua* 新文化 has almost never been discussed. The present paper argues that uniformly translating *xin* as “new” and *wenhua* as “culture” tends to blur the picture instead of making it clearer, for by so doing one unconsciously endorses the narrative of radical Chinese intellectuals while silencing other voices. Furthermore, the article puts forward the idea that terms such as *wenhua* 文化 encompassed a “multiplicity of potential readings” that have much to do with the transformation of Chinese language at the beginning of the 20th century, and with the emergence of a new conceptual repertoire. In their attempts to appropriate *xin wenhua* and turn it into a seemingly coherent movement with an agenda, Chinese intellectuals were fighting a war over the topic of “civilization/culture”, but also, and perhaps primarily education. Yet, by employing the term “culture” in academic writing today, we tend to produce a historical dissonance for their use of this term is not our own: we thus fall into the trap of semantic transparency, and forget that the concept of “culture” has a problematic history in both China and the West. By questioning the use of *wenhua* with regard to the May Fourth Movement, I provide evidence that the accepted translation of culture can be problematic if one does not clearly spell out the meaning located behind it, as the Chinese *wenhua* often did not mean “Chinese culture” in our modern, all too modern, anthropological sense.

Keywords: New Culture Movement, historiography, conceptual history, culture, China

Ali je »nova kultura« ustrezen prevod za *Xin wenhua*? Nekaj kritičnih pripomb k dolgo prezrti dilemi

Izvilleček

Že nekaj desetletij smo priča temeljiti prenovi našega razumevanja »gibanja za novo kulturo«. Vendar se o primernosti »nove kulture« kot ustreznega prevoda za *xin wenhua* 新文化 skoraj nikoli ni razpravljalo. Avtor v pričujočem članku trdi, da enoznačno prevajanje

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izraza *xin* kot »nov« in *wenhua* kot »kultura« zamegljuje sliko, namesto da bi postala jasnejša, kajti s tem nezavedno podpiramo naracijo radikalnih kitajskih intelektualcev, medtem ko utišamo glasove drugih. Poleg tega je v članku predstavljena ideja, da izraz, kot je *wenhua*, zajema »množico potencialnih branj«, ki imajo veliko opraviti s preobrazbo kitajskega jezika v začetku 20. stoletja in s pojavom novega konceptualnega repertoarja. V prizadevanju, da bi si prisvojili *xin wenhua* in ga spremenili v na videz skladno gibanje z agendo, so kitajski intelektualci bili bitko glede problema »civilizacija/kultura«, pa tudi in morda predvsem glede izobraževanja. Z uporabo izraza »kultura« v današnjem akademskem pisanju se nagibamo k ustvarjanju zgodovinskega neskladja, saj uporaba tega izraza ni naša lastna: tako pademo v past semantične prosojnosti in pozabimo, da ima koncept »kulture« problematično zgodovino tako na Kitajskem kot na Zahodu. S prevpraševanjem uporabe *wenhua* v povezavi s četrtomajskim gibanjem avtor podaja dokaze, da je lahko sprejeti prevod kulture problematičen, če ni jasno razložen pomen, ki se skriva za njim, saj kitajski izraz *wenhua* ponavadi ni pomenil »kitajske kulture« v modernem, vse preveč modernem, antropološkem smislu.

Ključne besede: gibanje za novo kulturo, zgodovinopisje, konceptualna zgodovina, kultura, Kitajska

Introduction

In the history of modern China, the "New Culture Movement" (*xin wenhua yundong* 新文化運動) has long been an iconic one. Often regarded as a decisive milestone in the Chinese modernity narrative, it has been intimately associated with the whole May Fourth Movement and era. Until recently, following the almost canonical study by Chow Tse-tung (1960), the beginning of the New Culture Movement has often been dated from 1915 and been regarded as the crystallization of the intellectual transformations that inspired the May Fourth demonstration. Furthermore, it had an intricate relationship with the history of the Chinese Communist Party, of whom it would be legitimate to say that it integrated the former to its origin narrative. Yet recent academic literature has called into question these one-sided assumptions and readings. Not only have we gone beyond this "May Fourth paradigm" (Chow 2008), but we have also included dissonant voices, notably those of conservatives (Zheng and Jia 2005). The narrative of the Movement has thus been decentred (Ip and Lee 2003), and the overwhelming place given to "intellectual discourses" has been challenged as we have looked into the everyday social life of those involved (e.g. Lanza 2010). Far from being a clear break with the past, the May Fourth intellectual blossoming was in fact the result of a long process that stretched over several decades, and that found its origins in various forms of writings from the late-Qing period. The current state of the art

has, furthermore, shown evolution with regard to the importance given to individuals as well as places outside Beijing and Shanghai. Additionally, there has been an ever-growing process of “memorialization of the movement as an event, symbol, and imagery” (Wang 2019, 144). The commemorations of its hundredth anniversary confirm this orientation. Regarding the date of birth of the “New Culture Movement”, we have started to abandon the idea that the movement began with the publication of *The New Youth* journal in 1915, or even in 1914 with the magazine *Tiger* (Weston 1998, 260). Some scholars have astutely noticed that the word *wenhua yundong* 文化運動 was to be found in no titles of periodical essays before 1919 (Kuo 2017, 55). In fact: “The expression ‘New Culture Movement’ was only invented in the late summer 1919, a few months after the May Fourth demonstrations” (Forster 2017, 1254).¹ The New Culture Movement found its origins in 1919 (Sang 2015). All in all, thanks to a better care given to the historical agents’ vocabulary and positions, we have recently been witnessing a profound renewal in our understanding of this key moment in modern Chinese history.

Yet, with the recent celebrations of the May Fourth Movement’s hundredth anniversary, the term “New Culture Movement” has been given new publicity and been widely uncritically used in academic and non-academic discourses, as if the interrogations recently raised by the specialized scientific literature were still unknown. As a consequence, and taking as a departure point some recent and very stimulating readings of the May Fourth period by Elisabeth Forster and Kuo Yapei, the present paper wishes to push their historiographical insights further. In this vein, I would like to open a critical reflection on a problem long overlooked in the literature: by translating *xin wenhua* 新文化 as “new culture” without adding clarification, we fail to capture the richness of what was being discussed in 1919 and project upon the past an anachronistic outlook.

In a 2017 article, Elisabeth Forster analysed the Chinese expression “New Culture Movement” and “the way discourses were created around it”, and concluded that it not as a movement *per se*, but “a buzzword, used by little-known intellectuals to market a variety of agendas they had been endorsing for a number of years” (Forster 2017, 1254).² It was thus a label retrospectively applied to a series

1 Forster had already put forward this idea in 2014. We also need to admit that about sixty years ago Chow Tse-tung had already noted that the term “New Culture” had only become popular in the early 1920s (Chow 1960, 194). However, he did not go as far as delimiting a clear line of separation between the “New Culture Movement” and the overarching “May Fourth Movement” as, for instance, Rana Mitter (2004, 18) has done.

2 Elisabeth Forster has since published a monograph on the year 1919 (Forster 2018) that discussed in detail not only the history of the “New Culture Movement”, but also how this hegemonic buzzword redistributed symbolic meaning “within a pool of competing agendas, which had existed for a while” (*ibid.*, 195) and would continue for a long time after 1919.

of propositions in order to market them (ibid. 2018, 91–129). Formulated by peripheral intellectuals, the expression was to be reappropriated by figures such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) or Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962). Kuo Ya-pei has also brilliantly argued that

the New Culture Movement, with clear fault lines against all non-supporters and a stress upon ideological cohesion, was constructed in 1923–1924, when the young Chinese Communist Party formulated its propaganda strategy for the purpose of the United Front. (Kuo 2017, 54–55)

Chen’s role was instrumental in building-up the proper noun “New Culture Movement”, later to be formalized by Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935) and Deng Zhongxia 鄧中夏 (1894–1933). Kuo has, in this regard, brought more support to Forster’s position, while simultaneously deconstructing the genealogy of our historiographical outlook on the matter.³ Her distinction between *wenhua yundong* and *xin wenhua yundong* in the prose of Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) is also very valuable (Kuo 2017, 62–63), as it has shown that *wenhua yundong* was obviously a term whose meaning was contested.

In direct continuity with regard to the works quoted above, the present paper wishes to question our understanding of what the New Culture Movement was. However, instead of bringing out new materials that would offer some supplementary insights into the already numerous and diverse arrays of studies concerning with this topic, I would like to offer a critical inquiry into the very term *xin wenhua yundong*, how we historicize it, and analyse it. I argue that the Chinese term *xin wenhua yundong* ought not to be systematically and uncritically translated as “New Culture Movement”, because it is an expression that is genuinely ambivalent, and it is this very ambiguity that has loomed large in its subsequent use. If the term “movement” does not raise much concern—except for the opportunity of using the plural form of the word—I would beg to differ regarding *xin* as “new” and *wenhua* as “culture”: reading *xin* solely as an adjective is not only reductive, but translating *wenhua* into “culture” could be also deemed anachronistic, because “culture” bears in today’s parlance a strong national identity-related orientation that was not present in the concept of *wenhua* as discussed and contested at the time. In translating *xin wenhua* as “new culture”, we are in fact endorsing the thesis that this or these movement(s) were calling for the complete Westernization of China, and destruction or at least transvaluation of Chinese national

3 In 1987, Ursula Richter had already pointed out the decisive influence the Chinese radical intellectuals and their simplification (or should we say appropriated narrative) had had on the outlook the young European and American sinologist had with regard to Modern China.

culture, understood as a social category that defines a specific way of life shared by a people.⁴ Last but not least, though the notion of “buzzword” has its heuristic virtues, I would rather use the German *Schlagwort*. Following the conceptual history typology, I think that it is important to denote “culture” as both a “collective concept” (*Sammlungsbegriff*) and a “mobilization concept” (*Bewegungsbegriff*), i.e. concepts “capable of reordering and mobilizing anew the masses robbed of their place in the old order of estates” (Koselleck 1979, 113). The only remark I would add regarding this characterization is that before being a concept addressed to the masses, it first emerged as a concept to mobilize the intellectual elite as a social group, the “literati-cum-intellectuals” (expression taken from Hon 2013) and the students who were looking for new positions and a sense of belonging after the collapse of Imperial institutions.

We must be very careful because *xin wenhua* encompassed a “multiplicity potential readings” that have much to do with the transformation of the Chinese language at the beginning of the 20th century and with the emergence of a new key concept (*Grundbegriff*) in East Asia: 文化 (*wenhua* C., *bunka* J., *munhwa* K., *văn hóa* V.). In their attempts to appropriate *xin wenhua* and turn it into a seemingly coherent movement with an agenda, Chinese intellectuals were fighting a conceptual war over the topic of “civilization/culture”, a struggle that, of course, shares some similarities with the opposition between the French *La Civilisation* and the German *Kultur* during the First World War, but that should not be regarded as a *bis repetita* of Western debates.⁵ A strong emphasis on education and how one should write was also put to the fore. One therefore has to take into account the fact that if *xin wenhua* has often been translated as “New Culture”, it is because some historical agents that proclaimed themselves actors of this movement translated the term as such. Yet, by employing this *terminus technicus* in academic writing today, we can produce historical dissonances as their use of the term “culture” is not our own. We fall into the trap of semantic transparency, and forget that the concept of “culture” also has a problematic

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- 4 Research on the term “culture” has shown that this concept was far from having a shared understanding in the academic literature. In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn had already identified hundreds of definitions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952), and in the years since many have tried to subsume these definitions under broad categories (e.g., Certeau 1974, 167–68; Jenks 2005, 11–12). In this study I use category n°4 of Jenks or category d from for Certeau, that were built on Tylor’s affirmation that “culture or Civilization, (...), is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man a member of society” (Tylor 1871, vol. 1, 1). For a synthetic, but nonetheless pertinent description of the evolution of the use of “culture” as a category and concepts in the social sciences, see Cuche (2016).
- 5 In his investigation into culturalism and the concept of culture in Bengal, Andrew Sartori has already shown that it was possible to relocate the Bengali concept of culture into a global history without regarding it as a deviation or a reiteration of a European concept (Sartori 2008).

history—Raymond Williams used to present it as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (Williams 1976, 76),⁶ and this judgment is probably as valid in many other languages, including Mandarin. As such, the aim of this paper is not to offer a better alternative—something that would probably be difficult and perhaps not even necessary because in a sense our “culture” is as protean as the Chinese *wenhua*—but to raise our awareness that though there is never a truly ideal translation, it is always necessary to clearly denote the meaning of terms in context. Speaking of the “New Culture Movement” without any quotation marks or supplementary clarifications on the Chinese terminology in the specific context in which it is used can lead us to read the terms anachronistically and, for instance, think that a unified New Culture Movement was trying to dismiss the entirety of a Chinese traditional culture, understood in a national sense.⁷

This paper will proceed in three stages: firstly, I will formulate some critical remarks on our historiographical outlook regarding this movement, then the meaning of the character *xin* 新 will be reconsidered, and finally I will offer a brief preliminary inquiry into the problematic history of the concept of *wenhua* which operated at the core of the expression.

Some Remarks on Our Historiographical Outlook

To begin our reflection, one should take a step back, and consider the general schemes that orientated our understanding of the May Fourth period’s intellectual debates up to today. It is possible to say that the following two paradigms have been very influential.

First, our approach to the sources has been dominated by the political agenda of the radicals. Following them, the so-called New Culture Movement has often been considered as “a cultural revolution” whose motive was to draw a clear line with the past (Lin 1979). A partial access to the documents, the weight of the Communist Party’s discourse on the May Fourth Movement (notably Mao 1939), and also a conscious appropriation of the movement narrative by some

6 See the very rich notice provided by Jorg Fisch in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* dictionary (Fisch 1992).

7 I here am not completely convinced by Julia C. Schneider’s recent argument regarding the idea that in China culturalistic concepts of the world became merged with nationalist concepts in the early twentieth century (Schneider 2020)—for her use of the term “culturalism” denotes more an analytical category used by researchers than a precise series of concepts in the source material.

of its actors (Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich 2001, 1)—notably Hu Shi⁸—could be pointed out as the main culprits for this one-sided approach. This paradigm has, however, been shattered by several new elements put forward by recent research. The continuity between the intellectual fights of the late-Qing era intellectuals and those of the early Republican period has been underlined by many studies, notably in the literary field (Wang 1997; Chen 2011), and with regard to the evolution of the Chinese language (Kaske 2004). It has been pointed out that the radical agenda of people such as Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi were not at first regarded as in a winning position (Forster 2014). Instead of being the concrete political prolongation of the reform of thought movement upheld by *New Youth* intellectuals, the events of May 4th 1919 saved the agenda of the former by providing it with a renewed popularity. Besides, the New Culture, or *xin wenhua*, was a project not exclusive to the radicals. Intellectuals often put under the “neoconservative” label even considered themselves as part of this movement. In a letter to Liang Boqiang 梁伯強 (1899–1968), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), for instance, insisted on the fact that he wished to “propagate the new culture” (*xuan-zhuan xinwenhua* 宣傳新文化) (Liang 1920b, 6027).

Liang Qichao, but also, Lan Gongwu 藍公武 (1887–1957), Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀 (1886–1973), Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1887–1969) and the entire group of scholars associated with the Research Clique (*yanjiu xi* 研究系) regarded themselves as contributors to this intellectual renewal movement (Peng 2003; Zhou 2019). As a matter of fact, they were the ones to establish the “Public Study Association” (*gongxue she* 共學社) and the “Lecture and Study Association” (*jiangxue she* 講學社), key institutions that made many translations of Western works possible (Zhang 1992, 139–46). They are also the ones who invited Western scholars such as Russell and Dewey to China. These people, later castigated as the enemies of the New Culture, were in fact its most important proponents on the institutional side. Therefore, we need to keep in mind that the New Culture was not the property of the radicals, at some point almost all intellectuals believed in participating to the movement. Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) is a well-known example here. But things changed when the intellectuals surrounding Chen started a move to appropriate the movement’s entire narrative.

The second paradigm, and perhaps the most important, has been the narrative proposed by Joseph Levenson when he pointed at a supposed contradiction between

8 In his *Chinese Renaissance*, Hu put emphasis on his own contributions to the intellectual transformation of modern China, with sometimes a glimpse of hypocrisy, castigating Liang Qichao as only a mere journalist (Hu 1933, 38) or Liang Shuming as the author of a book with a pretentious title (*The Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*) (ibid., 39), while suggesting that his own proposals for the reform of literature were “modest” (ibid., 58).

“Chinese cultural identity” and “modernity” (Levenson 1958). There is an entire field of literature debunking parts of Levenson thesis. And yet an important aspect of his work has been insufficiently discussed: the idea that Chinese Nationalism emerged as “a denial of culturalism” (ibid., 105). Without entering into the debate as to whether such affirmation is appropriate or not in terms of content, there is here a latent problem with its very formulation. It presupposes that the vocabulary and imaginary of the nation set aside the one of culture. The problem is that by saying so we neglect the history of those concepts and forget that “culture” is as modern a notion as that of a “nation”, perhaps even younger. “Culture” has become such a common notion in our everyday vocabulary that we tend to forget that even during the historical period discussed here it was not a common term in Europe. In the early 1920s, it was still a novelty for French people to speak of a “national culture” (Bénéton 1975, 73–84), and only the Germans had any real use of the term *Kultur*. As has been rightly pointed out by Tessa Morris-Suzuki, the

anthropological interpretation of culture as “the civilization of a people (particularly at a certain stage of development)” first appears in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1933, but for many decades the English use of “culture” remained unstable, hovering uncomfortably between the older notion of “mental and moral cultivation” and the newer notion of “the practices and beliefs of a particular society”. (Morris-Suzuki 1995, 761)

The term “culture” gained worldwide popularity only from the 1920s on (Elliot 2002; Mauviel 2011; Cuche 2016).

Even the idea that there exists a field of “culture” distinguished from those of politics and economy is a very late distinction, and perhaps not an operative one in this context, as suggested by Fabio Lanza (2010). Besides, “culture” has always been a political notion. Therefore, one needs to question how Chinese intellectuals used this notion, and pay much attention to the chronology of events and texts. For instance, Chen Duxiu hardly had an operative concept of culture under the word *wenhua* before 1918 (Claudo 2015). *New Youth* did not attack the figure of Confucius because he was the core of “the traditional Chinese culture”, but because his thought served as the foundation of a rotten social system. As Chen said himself: “This journal attacks Confucius, because it is a moral of a patriarchal society that is not appropriate for modern life. We have never put forward any arguments that go beyond this” (本誌詆孔，以為宗法社會之道德，不適於現代生活，未嘗過此以立論也) (Chen 1916, 11). The critique of Confucianism was social and not cultural (van Ess 2012). And it is in fact the theme of social reform that was at the core of the May Fourth Movement (Yang 2009). Placing emphasis on the importance of “society” (*shehui* 社會) as perhaps one of the most central

concepts of the time is, in this sense, crucial. As a matter of fact, much research in conceptual history has outlined the rise of this term in the decades preceding 1919, and how it acted as both an indicator and factor of historical change (Tsin 1997; Jin and Liu 2008, 180–225; Vogelsang 2012).

It is, furthermore, relevant that students and intellectuals organized themselves in a specific new form of social action, “the movement” (*yundong* 運動). Among the many features of these movements that were described in detail by Rudolf G. Wagner, one could point at their “elitist structure”: “Its protagonists assumed the roles not of spokesmen and representative but of teachers, avant-garde, and guide for the rest of the population” (Wagner 2001, 67). Chen Duxiu’s own understanding of what a movement was clearly puts emphasis on its agency as a political form of action realized by the citizens (*ibid.*, 78). And, of course, through his intellectual and political activities, he intended to orientate the political activity of his readers. That is why one can legitimately regard his *xin wenhua* as a “mobilization concept”. Besides, it is worth mentioning that the term “movement” (*yundong*) was widely used to describe social and political activities and dynamics in the 1910s and 1920s (see the many examples given by Weston 2004, 217 or Forster 2017, 165). Basically, each “agenda” was promoted through a “movement”. Peter Zarrow was thus right when he framed this period as “an era of movements” (Zarrow 2006, 3). One should also note that the chronological proximity with the events of May 1919 and the rise of nationalistic claims by the Chinese population progressively estranged the “new culture” from a more globalized logic: civilizational renewal was no longer an international phenomenon, but something that China had for itself.⁹ As such, when we speak of an overarching and all-inclusive “May Fourth Movement” (always with capital letters) as Chow Tse-gung first did it (1960, 5), we dismiss the plurality of sociopolitical actions under a unique label and we lock it up in a nationalistic theme.¹⁰ Therefore, it could be worth wondering if instead of a May Fourth Movement it would not be better to speak May Fourth *Movements*, and by extension also New Culture *Movements*, exiting by this means the complete idea of a unified “May Fourth spirit”, as proclaimed by some historical agents of the time such as Luo Jialun 羅家倫 (1897–1969) (Luo 1919). Affirming the existence of such a *Zeitgeist* when the events took place meant playing one’s part in an intellectual debate, but taking back this term in academic

9 In these regards, Kuo Ya-pei’s remarks about Cai Yuanpei or Zhang Dongsun first locating the debate in an international setting (Kuo 2017, 59) are very important. It points to the fact that the turmoil experienced by China were read through the angle of global transformation of human society, characterized by the rise of socialism (a topic put forward by the Research Clique). It was not simply a national issue.

10 Despite its international dimension, the idea of “Wilsonian Moment” postulated by Manela (2007) captures the May Fourth era into a nation-oriented narrative of modern Asian history.

literature is a fallacy in historical reasoning. After all, the Chinese language does not mark the plural, especially in the context of a *Schlagwort* whose semantic ambiguity adds to its performative power. Needless to say, Liang Qichao’s “New Culture Movement” was not Chen Duxiu’s.

Moreover, one needs to include in our reading framework the concrete economic and institutional dimensions of the problem. Despite the fact that they were located in an “intellectual field”, the debates literarily took place on the pages of newspapers and journals that participated in “print capitalism” (Reed 2004, 8–9).¹¹ To survive, and to implement their agendas, “New Culture” actors had to sell their texts, a situation that explains the polemical tone frequently used. Accordingly, Wang Qisheng 王奇生 noted that the debates between the writers of *New Youth* and, for instance, *The Eastern Miscellany* (he took the 1917–1918 controversy between Chen Duxiu and Du Yaquan 杜亞泉 (1873–1933) as an illustration) were also part of an economic war. Chen’s attacks against other journals were an editorial strategy: he hoped to delegitimize the journal and steal its readership (Wang 2007, 29–32). This problem became all the more important with the “war of the manuals” (Reed 2004, 206). Defining the New Culture meant defining what would be taught to students, and what manuals they would buy. The rise of *baihua* fostered a highly heated debate on whether it should be used as the main form of writing in manuals (Culp 2008). With the Education Ministry ordering all textbooks to be published in *baihua* in April 1920 (Zheng 2001, 206), the concrete consequences of the intellectual debates became obvious. It is also in 1920 that the Commercial Press released their “new culture” Collection. In the early 1920s, many institutions, associations, libraries, and groups were founded with names referring to the popular new expression of *wenhua* or *xin wenhua* (Zhang 1979). A section of Shanghai was even nicknamed the “Cultural Avenue” (*wenhua jie* 文化街) because of the dense concentration of bookshops and editors there. *Xin wenhua* was a term that crossed the entire society, and not simply a concept for intellectuals. Having these elements mind, let us now go back to the very term itself.

New or Renew the Culture?

An important historiographical remark I wish to make here is that one has to be cautious with how we understand and translate the character *xin* 新. Lee Oufan has defended the idea that “in the popular parlance (of the May Fourth era), to be ‘modern’ mean(t) above all to be ‘new’ (*xin*), to be consciously opposed to the

11 See more generally the “material side” of books and journal publishing and its impact on society recently put to the fore by Culp 2019.

‘old’ (*jiu* 舊)” (Lee 1991, 159). To support this idea, he took as an argument the multiplication of terms and journal titles including the character *xin*. He saw here a watershed between the ancient and modern, a transition between a cyclical understanding of time and a linear evolutionary approach. Chinese intellectuals felt they were part of a new epoch (Sun 1986), articulated by the “performative declaration” (Owen 2001, 171) of being *xin*. Lee’s thesis is valuable as it helps us to better understand the intellectual positions of some evolutionist thinkers, notably people gravitating around the *New Youth* journal. When someone like Wang Shuqian 汪叔潛 wrote, “What we call ‘new’ is nothing but the culture imported from the West; what we call ‘old’ is nothing else but the culture that China has had for ages (所謂新者無他，即外來之西洋文化也；所謂舊者無他，即中國固有之文化也如是。)” (Wang 1915, 3), it fits perfectly in Lee’s pattern. *New Youth* writers’ uses of the term encompassed a Darwinian logic—Chen Jia’ai 陳嘉謨 would later write in a column for *New Tide* that “new means being adapted, being adapted that means being new” (Chen, Jia’ai 1919, 44). Yet, presenting the entire intellectual panorama under such a light would not only be incomplete but also partial.

First, the examples often quoted to stress the opposition between the “ancient” and the “modern” are more often taken from the debates relating to the problem of “the new thought” (*xin sixiang* 新思想) than from the one about “the new culture” (*xin wenhua*). It would be wise to distinguish the two, and also admit that in the scope of the earlier debates not everyone, even among *New Youth* writers, was totalistic in their rejection of the old—borrowing Nietzsche’s term, Hu Shi understood the new thought as “a transvaluation of value” (Hu 1919). Besides, in the discussions on whether a new thought ought to be implemented in China in 1919, one finds almost no intellectuals associated with the *New Youth*. Most of them came from the Research Clique, or from people gravitating around *The Eastern Miscellany*. Among the main debaters, one can mention the opposition of Chen Jiayi 陳嘉異 (1919) and Zhang Shizhao 章士釗 (1919) to Zhang Dongsun (1919a; 1919b), or the exchange between Du Yaquan 杜亞泉 (1919) and Jiang Menglin 蔣夢麟 (1920).¹²

Secondly, there is a logical pitfall in Lee’s argument; because it rests on the idea that *xin* is an adjective or a substantive: it neglects the possibility of reading it as a verb. Of course, *xin* means “new”, but it can also mean to “renew” or “renovate”.¹³ If one considers the reading materials used to teach Chinese pupils how to read at the end of the 19th century, like *The One-Thousand-Character Text* (*qian zi wen*

12 See also the synthesis of the debate proposed by Zhu Tiaosun (1920).

13 Reading *xin* as a verb in the intellectual texts of the late Qing and earlier Republican era has been a feature shared by several young French historians, such as Ma (2013) who translates Liang Qichao’s *Xinmin shuo* 新民說 as *De la rénovation du peuple*, or Morier-Genoud (2014) who proposes reading *xin shixue* 新史學, “renouveler l’histoire” and not “new history” (ibid., 175, note 10).

千字文) or *The Great Learning* (*daxue* 大學), *xin* is first understood in a transitive sense. Let us not forget that the older generation of intellectuals knew by heart those texts since their childhood.¹⁴

That is why considering *xin wenhua* as a *Schlagwort* and not only as a “buzzword” brings the matter under a clearer light. Rather more than a catchphrase, a *Schlagwort* is “an expression that gains particular topicality in a specific time, and with which one often promotes a program or an objective. *Schlagworte* are to orientate the thought, the emotions and the attitudes of men” (Niehr 2007, 496). They are therefore part of the vocabulary used in political debates, and it is a common move to try to transform their meaning to attack one’s opponent. Chinese intellectuals were not simply “surfing” on a trend, or marketing their position. With the popular expression *xin wenhua*, they could, of course, advertise their program, but the term in itself implied a renewal of *Weltanschauung* and social practices. In the case of *civilization*, Emile Benveniste had spoken of a word “that inculcates a new outlook of the world” (Benveniste 1974, vol. 1, 336). Such a description would also fit *xin wenhua* (especially when one considers that *wenhua* originally meant “civilization”, as noted below). The problem was, however, that the Chinese did not agree on the outlook to transmit to the people—a situation that brought someone like Zhang Junmai to assert that to set the direction of a Chinese new culture one needed first to clarify an outlook on life (Zhang 1923, 914). This position stirred the 1923 debate over “Sciences and Outlooks on Life” (Huang 2002; Isay 2013). In his 1922 review of Liang Shuming’s *Cultures of East and West and Their Philosophies*, Zhang also implied that comparing the *wenhua* from East and West was no task for the present day, since China had no renewed culture (*xin wenhua* 新文化) yet (Zhang 1922, 225–26).¹⁵

By raising the issue of the grammatical nature of the character *xin*, I wish not to say that translating it as an adjective is wrong—in most of its occurrences it is the smoothest way to proceed—but instead to put forward the possibility of a “multiplicity of potential reading”: each intellectual understood it as it fit best with his

14 In his study of Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967), George Bê Duc did not hesitate to write that “for the intellectuals educated during the Qing era, the *wenyan* was the natural language for writing” (Bê Duc 2010, 28). I would go further as to say that it was also “the natural language for reading”.

15 In 1920, Hu Shi also had a similar line saying that “China has, as of now, no culture, and even less a new culture” (現在並沒有文化，更沒有什麼新文化) (Hu in Sang 2015, 5). The lines of both Hu and Zhang are impossible to understand if one remains mired in the idea that “culture” should be understood in a totalistic or anthropological sense. A few years later, Zhang Junmai would resume this line of thought by stressing the fact that the mind of China was a battlefield between the proponents of “national quintessence” (*guocui* 國粹) and those wishing to “Westernize” the country (*xihua* 西化). The consequence of this situation was that there were no longer any criteria on which one could establish a proper education for the young (Zhang 1925, 113). On the cultural outlook of Zhang in the 1920s, see Ciaudo (2016).

own program. And therefore, *xin wenhua yundong* could be as much a “New Culture Movement” as a *Kulturerneuerungsbewegung*—a translation used first, to my knowledge, by Thomas Fröhlich (1998). After all, while in the United States Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) also wrote that, “The ‘new’ culture movement may be, after all, simply the self-consciousness and self-examination of the old” (Fung 1922, 611).¹⁶ To dive deeper into this “multiplicity” of meaning, it is worth reading attentively the intellectuals that have been cast out of it by previous scholarship. The authors of the “conservative” *Xueheng* 學衡 journal are here a great example. Wu Mi 吳宓 (1894–1978), one of the main writers of this periodical, offered for example a great critique of the possibility that the “new” ought to simply be the negation of the past, and the full-scale adoption of something foreign. For him, instead of opposing a “new culture” to an “inherent” (*guyou* 固有) Chinese culture, the problem was to aim at the fusion of different intellectual horizons. Following the definition of culture by Matthew Arnold, he wrote:

Nowadays, the *Xin wenhua yundong* has translated itself as *New Culture Movement*, meaning as such that *wenhua* is “culture”. Matthew Arnold has given of this term the following definition: (...) *Culture is the best of what has been thought and said in the world*. According to this, those who today desire to build the (re) new (ed) culture of China should select the quintessence of Chinese and Western civilizations, cast and thread them together.

今新文化運動，自譯其名為New Culture Movement，是固以文化為Culture也。Matthew Arnold所作定義曰：文化者，古今思想言論之最精美者也。Culture is the best of what has been thought and said in the world。按此，則今慾造成中國之新文化，自當兼取中西文明之精華而熔鑄之，貫通之。(Wu 1922, 13–14)

Wu Mi was, furthermore, very harsh on the young students who, according to him, did not understand the meaning of the movement. Elsewhere, he noted:

Nowadays, young students read too little and lack experience, they make a mistake when consider that *xin wenhua yundong* advocate it only as the sole and full representative of Western civilization.

今中國少年學生，讀書未多，見聞缺乏，誤以新文化運動者之所主張為西洋文明全部之代表。(ibid., 2)

16 Another Confucian thinker, He Lin 賀麟 would later even write in this regard that “On the surface, the ‘New Culture Movement’ was one big movement to ‘smash the Confucian shop’ and to overturn Confucian thought. In reality however, the movement made a far greater contribution to the new unfolding of Confucian thinking than the support for Confucianism by individuals from the previous period (of the Self-Strengthening Movement) such as Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) and Zhang Zhidong” (He in Van den Stock 2016).

It is obvious that the term *xin wenhua yundong* was at the centre of an intellectual fight. And one can find in Chen Duxiu's texts many elements that clearly show that he was conscious of this battle for the term. In "What is the New Culture Movement?" he wrote: "Now among the detractors of the *xin wenhua yundong*, there are two ill-omened voices: the first claim that Science is useless, and that one should focus on Philosophy. The second is the one that claims that Westerners are nowadays turning themselves toward Oriental culture." (Chen 1920, 1) With the tone of a polemist, Chen was trying to cast out of the global movement those supporting these two assertions. But more conservative minds, like the writers of the *Xueheng* journal, answered Chen's criticisms, by accusing the promoters of *xin wenhua* (in Chen's logic) of being no more than "sophists", "imitators and no creators", "people looking for fame but no scholars", "politicians and not educators" (Mei 1921). They did not reject the idea of a *xin wenhua*, they rejected the one offered by Chen. They also had Western models, but they were not the same (Ong 2004). They looked up to Irving Babbitt (1855–1933) (Hon 2008), who personally supported their attempt to renovate Chinese literature and education (Wu 2004).

By limiting us to the narrative that the New Culture Movement was an attempt to establish a clear break from the past, we fall into the trap of the radical discourse, and forget the entire context of the discussions and notably their origins in the late 19th century. As Chen Pingyuan has written, one should "pay a special attention to the 'late Qing' inside 'May Fourth'" (Chen 2011, 4). As it has already been noted by previous studies (see notably Zhang 2002), the early years of the 1920s were marked by the segmentation of the intellectual field and ever-growing attempts for the various intellectual groups to mark a distance between "us" and "them". Different groups had very different understandings and uses of this until then uniform "New Culture Movement". And this was not only the case for intellectual groups, since official political groups also defended their own new culture.¹⁷ However, the strategy of the *New Youth* group to lump together all their opponents as conservatives who were enemies of "the New Culture" was successful in the long run, as the polarity between "conservative vs. radical" became an established historiographical convention.¹⁸ Even today, the weight of a unified May Fourth narrative is so powerful that many still fall into the epistemological trap and affirm, like Ouyang Zhesheng, that "the opinions held by Chen Duxiu gained a consensus among the contemporary New Culture camp" (Ouyang 2016, 93), although in truth they did not, or at least not before the mid-1920s. The

17 See the example of the Nationalist Party, studied by Ouyang Junxi (2009).

18 For a discussion of this polarity and the problem of grouping Chinese intellectuals under such labels, see Kuo (2017).

so-called official or orthodox new culture camp simply cut out of his own narrative the dissonant voices, as has been shown by Kuo Ya-pei (2017).

“Culture” as an Anachronistic Concept: Some Remarks on the Meaning of *wenhua*

Let us now turn to the biggest problem that challenges our understanding of this movement, that is the meaning of *wenhua*. Here we should perhaps take inspiration from Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann’s “crossed history” (*histoire croisée*), that they presented as a “triple historicization practice”: a historicization “of the object studied, of the scientific categories to analyze it, and also of the relationship between the researcher and his research” (Werner and Zimmermann 2004, 10, my emphasis). We often see “culture” as a totalistic concept with a strong foothold in anthropology. Tylor’s definition of “culture” as “the most complex whole” has had in this regard much influence in the general meaning associated with the term. In historical studies, “culture” is either used as a field of experience distinguished from, for instance, the political (*le politique*) or as “the instance of the social totality” (*instance de la totalité sociale*) (Chartier 2009, 73). Yet, one needs to keep in mind that culture is perhaps the “largest concept of social sciences” (Wallerstein 1990, 221), and that it has come to supplement a multiplicity of concepts. Indeed, one cannot fail to notice that it has become an unwieldy powerful indicator of difference, be political, social, racial, linguistic, or other. Furthermore, it is a fact that “definitions of culture are inevitably programmatic” (Bal 2002, 9). Therefore, culture as a direct translation of *wenhua* appears dangerous. The notion of “culture” is a heuristic tool that, in our case, brings more complexity to the problem than clarification.

To relocate precisely the meaning of the debate over the term *xin wenhua yundong*, we need to distance the vocabulary of the historical actors from our concept of “culture”. A conceptual history of *wenhua* is all the more necessary because this topic has often been disregarded by previous research in conceptual history. Luckily, over the last two decades two Chinese scholars, Fang Weigui (2003) and Huang Xingtao (2006, later translated into English 2011) have attempted to study the history of the Chinese concepts of *wenhua* 文化 and *wenming* 文明 in a contrastive approach, setting up the first chronology for these terms. Huang offers a five-step narrative. First, China had her own notions completely independent from the Western ones. Then the Western concept of civilization was first introduced in the middle of the 19th century by missionaries. Fang even mentions documents written in 1833 in which they supposedly used *wenming*

as a translation of "civilization". Third, the period surrounding 1895 and the One Hundred Days Reforms witnessed a vast dissemination of this vocabulary in the writings of political figures and statesmen.¹⁹ These were followed by a short period at the beginning of the 20th century in which emerged a reflection about the spirit (*jingshen* 精神) of "civilization". The last and final step was the May Fourth Era. This chronology is acceptable, but it has the default position of keeping the *wenhua* concept in subordination to the notion of *wenming*, aggravating the classic confusion between the two terms. As reckoned by both scholars, *wenhua* was a very rare term at the end of the 19th century. Huang identified its first occurrence in an article published in 1887 (Huang 2006, 20), but it only gained real popularity during the May Fourth Era, a time in which it seemingly distanced itself from *wenming*, a process unfortunately not analysed in Fang's and Huang's research.

Furthermore, despite this first framework, one needs to admit that their papers are not without epistemological issues. They strongly contrast what they call "traditional concepts of *wenhua* and *wenming*" with "modern concepts of *wenhua* and *wenming*". However, it is hard to accept that there were clearly established *wenming* and *wenhua* compounds before the end of the 19th century.²⁰ Of course, the literary and semantic background of the characters' *wen* 文, *ming* 明 and *hua* 化, that was embedded in Confucian thought, may have played a role in the orientation of the modern trajectory of *wenhua* and *wenming*, as they disclosed the persistence of past experiences. Yet, as noted by Koselleck, "the historical depth of a concept, which is not identical with the chronological succession of its meanings, gains (...) systematic import, which must be duly acknowledged by all sociohistorical research." One has to be concerned with the "contemporaneity of the uncontemporaneous" (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*) and not simply alternate between diachronic and synchronic readings (Koselleck 1979, 90). The problem is not to determine how a classic concept uninfluenced by the West turned into a "modern concept" for civilization or culture, but how different "Spaces of Experience" (*Erfahrungsräume*) and "Horizons of Expectation" (*Erwartungshorizonte*) interplayed in producing new meanings that in the end set the society on the move.

19 A situation probably triggered by the fact that "civilization" was a key term in the international environment (Gong 1984), and one can also agree with Prasenjit Duara when he presented "civilization" as "a postcolonial concept" (Duara 2001, 103).

20 A great example to illustrate this point is Luxun's text "Wenhua pian zhi lun 文化偏至論" (Luxun 1908). Most translations available today (be they in English, French or German) tend to translate *wenhua* into "culture". But in fact, the word appears only four times in the text, which is very few in comparison to the 29 *wenming*. Furthermore, on examining Luxun's prose it is obvious that the term doesn't have its modern, anthropological connotation. Its meaning oscillates between something very close to *wenming*, or a body of knowledge and practices that transforms men. On some occurrences, one could even doubt the fact that *wenhua* was one word, as it could be read as two.

Before going back to this issue, it could, however, be helpful to widen our outlook on this matter by considering the history of the “culture” concept in a larger East Asian context. Indeed, a burgeoning literature on the Japanese *bunka* and the Korean *munhwa* is very helpful here. First, in the Japanese case, it has been shown that *bunka* was a term developed after *bunmei*, and it gained its popularity only during the 1920s (Morris-Suzuki 1995, 763). Of course, some authors who participated in the “Nipponist moment” (1888–1897) (Perroncel 2016) articulated around the Japanese journal (*Nihonjin* 日本人) and the Society for Public Education (*Sei-kyō sha* 政教社), had occasional uses of the term *bunka*. Kuga Katsunan 陸羯南 (1857–1907) notably spoke of a “national culture” (*kokumin bunka* 国民文化) at the end of the 19th century (Nishikawa 2001, 249–63). But we need to differentiate the multiple chronologies, as it is not because one or a few authors use a term that it then becomes a concept. Indeed, according to Quentin Skinner, “the surest sign that a society has entered into the secure possession of a new concept is that a new vocabulary will be developed, in terms of which the concept can then be publicly articulated and discussed” (Skinner 1979, vol. 2, 352). As Suzuki pointed out, the term *bunka* was first used in Japan to translate German political notions such as *Kulturstaat*, it also held a role in the translation of *Kultur* as used by Neokantian philosophers.²¹ However, during the public debate of the Meiji Era, it was not only very rare (it is for instance, absent in Fukuzawa Yukichi’s 福澤諭吉 (1835–1901) writings), but it also often meant the same thing as *bunmeikaika* 文明開化, and was but an abbreviation of this (Suzuki 1981, 54–55).²² That is notably attested in Nishi Amane’s 西周 (1829–1897) writing (Nishikawa 2001, 225). Furthermore, saying that *bunka*, or *wenhua* for that matter, served as a translation of the German *Kultur*, is rather doubtful, for a host of studies have now documented how the translation of the Western vocabulary in East-Asia didn’t simply entail moving one piece of vocabulary to another context: translating was “a creative act of generating meaning and constructing discourse” (Howland 2003, 45). More recent research has furthermore strengthened the thesis that the concept *bunka* emerged out of the expression *bunmeikaika* (Chen 2016). This brings the attention to the importance of distinguishing the use of a term in a specialized field of discourse and on a more general level. In 1922, Liang Qichao could write that the term *wenhua* had been long discussed by German philosophers like Rickert and Wundt, but completely bypass their thesis in the production of his own definition (Liang 1922).

21 One could also mention here the contrasting example of the early translation of “culture” as understood by Matthew Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). The early Japanese rendition of this term was *bunka* 文華 and not *bunka* 文化 (Shimizu 2016; 2017), a term later abandoned.

22 One should note that there is also a problem in our translation of *bunmei kaika* in a Japanese context, since originally the first part, *bunmei*, meant “enlightenment” and the second, *kaika*, “civilisation” (on this issue, see Howland 1996, 33–35, 212).

Until recently, it has often been considered that *wenhua* was a loan word from Japanese (Sanetō 1982, 328; Liu 1995, 308, 312). However, it is difficult to fathom that “*wenhua*” was translated from the Japanese as early as its neighbour concept of *wenming* (*bunka* is, for instance, absent of Masini 1993’s corpus). It is well attested that *bunmei* or *wenming* were imported from Japanese as early as the end of the 19th century, and that Liang Qichao played a decisive role in its dissemination (Huang 1972, 53–56; Kawajiri 2010). But at that time, the most common term used to defend what we would call today a Japanese “cultural identity” was *kokusui* 国粹 and not *bunka*—a term that would be imported by the Chinese intellectuals such as Zhang Taiyan or Liu Shiwei, and the people revolving around the *Journal of National Essence* (*Guocui bao* 國粹報) (cf. Hon 2013). It is by the way worth recalling some remarks made by Laurence Schneider on this topic. He has written that at the end of the 19th century Chinese scholars discovered “culture” (*guocui* 國粹) as “a special body of native literature and art as a thing-in-itself, independent of and even more fundamental than the political and even social institutions which until then had been intimately associated with it” (Schneider 1976, 57). Schneider’s translation of *guocui* as “culture” is perfectly understandable and legitimate in the context of the end of the Qing. However, it raises the question of why *wenhua* emerged later as a competing concept for this semantic field. Some scholars have suggested that there was a transition from *guocui* to *wenhua* (Liu 1995, 239–56), and the latter term gained pre-eminence over the former. But this process still needs to be documented and analysed in detail.

As noted above, in Japan *bunka*, as culture, only gained popularity in the 1920s, when there emerged “a competition over cultural goods”. Jordan Sand has rightly pointed out that the discourse over *bunka*—and the multiplication of *bunka* as a prefix for anything and everything, a process translated as “cultural splash” (*bunka donburi* 文化丼) by Harootunian (2000, 57)²³—signified a “fragmentation of public discourse” (Sand 2000, 99). *Bunka* was not a term used by intellectuals alone in their quest to identify and defend a specific culture or civilization, but embraced the entire society in its most practical and concrete sense. The rise of *bunka* in the 1920s and 1930s is in this regard impossible to isolate from the rise of what we would call “mass culture”. According to Tsumura Hideo 津村 秀夫 (1907–1985), quoted by Harootunian, “the term culture had been entirely absorbed by material artifacts, leaving nothing for the realm of spirit” (Harootunian 2000, 57), a phenomenon denounced as Americanism. In the intellectual field, we

23 In China, one does not find this kind of semantic construction. However, the word *wenming* was often used in the sense of “Western” and “modern” in association with daily products. In her review of Chinese neologisms, Mateer gives the original example of the “Foreign-style shop” (*wenming jianfa chu* 文明剪髮處) (Mateer 1922, 39).

also have to wait for the writing of Sakaguchi Takakimi (坂口昂君 (1872–1928)) to put forward the idea that *bunka* is the most important unifying factor of a people, before race or ethnicity (Doak 1998, 191). In a purer philosophical register, “The Concept of *bunka*” (*Bunka no Gainen* 文化の概念) by Hajime Tanabe 田邊元 (1889–1962) published in 1922 can also be regarded as one of the first publications raising *bunka* toward the status of a local philosophical concept and not simply a translation device. As a matter of fact, *wenhua* became popular in China at the same time as *bunka* in Japan.

The Korean scenario also points toward the late development of the concept of *wenhua*. Ku Inmo has argued that *munhwa* was a concept imported from Japan only in the 1920s and was part of a Japanese attempt to call “its colonial ethnic groups the people of the Japanese Empire” (Ku 2007, 169). Despite the research on a common Korean *munhwa* developed by the intellectuals associated with the *Gaebyeok* journal stirred up Korean nationalism (Robinson 1988, 57–64), Ku has claimed that *munhwa* was a highly instrumentalized notion. In those years, it was redefined through its relation with the Japanese *bunka*. If the term *munhwa* was present in Korean writing at the end of the 19th century, it was at this point only a synonym of “civilization”. In his description of the history of *munhwa* in Korea before the 1920s, Kim Hyunjoo dates back to the years 1906–1908 the use of this term to translate the European notion of “culture/*Kultur*”. Such a position is for instance obvious in Choe Nam-seon’s writing, where it is understood it as “the whole lifestyle of a nation” (한 민족의 생활 방식 전체 or 한 민족의生活方式全體) (Choe in Kim 2015, 26). Yet, despite the appearance of this “emergent” concept of *munhwa*, Kim insists that the understanding of *munhwa* as “civilization” remained the “dominant” approach. In his partition between a “residual concept” of *munhwa*, a “dominant” and an “emergent” concept, Kim Hyunjoo’s article is here illuminating, and offers elements for comparison in the Chinese intellectual field. In China, as in Korea, under the term *wenhua* were included various different concepts, or I would say conceptual directions.

Let us focus on the problem of the residual, or what I would rather frame as the “contemporaneity of the unctemporaneous”. In analysing the term *wenhua*, we often have one word in mind. Yet when we say that *wenhua* is one word, we close our analysis to other possibilities. Of course, *wenhua* is a neologism, but Chinese neologisms have a specific feature that we need focus on. As Michael Lackner framed it “their indivisibility is but apparent, because the semantic depth of the elements building every neologism act in such a manner that the reader is tempted to analyze them separately and dissociate them from one another” (Lackner 1993, 149). Therefore, a conceptual history of *wenhua*, or any modern Chinese concept, would require both semasiological and onomasiological studies at the

level of the final concept, and at the one of the morphemes working as suppress building blocks. We have to be conscious of the transformation underwent by *wen* to understand the potential meanings of *wenhua*. In these regards, the meaning of *wen* has experienced important changes throughout its history, and notably by the end of the 19th century, when it shifted from “Ornament” to “Literature” (Blitstein 2016). But let us not open too many doors at once, and come back to the problem of how to read *wenhua*. For some leading intellectuals, notably those who had been educated in the traditional system before the collapse of the Imperial examination system, it was still possible to divide the *wenhua* compound. A striking example is offered by Zhang Junmai in 1922:

The direction for the (re)new(ed) Chinese culture of tomorrow should depart from our own choices, and take its sources in the exigencies formulated by our people’s spirit and initiative. When the Westerners do one thing, and we imitate them, we are but puppets on a stage or hat-wearing monkeys, there is nothing that could be called a *wen*, there is even less that could be called a *hua*.

吾國今後新文化之方針，當由我自決，由我民族精神上自行提出要求。若謂西洋人如何，我便如何，此乃傀儡登場，此為沐猴而冠，既無所為文，更無所為化。(Zhang 1922, 225)

Although Zhang was obviously aiming for a literary effect, his division of the term *wenhua* shows us that it was not counterintuitive for him to read the components of the word separately. As such, *wenhua* could be understood as the fusion of two morphemes having clearly distinct meanings. In fact, four possibilities could be offered to us. One could read it as one lexeme, one syntagm, two lexemes or one lexeme with a supplementary suffix. This later reading—that is understanding *wenhua* as the adding up of the suffix *-hua* “-ation” to the concept of *wen*—could in this regard be very engaging. In such a manner, *wenhua* would not mean “culture” but “*wenization*” or education, alphabetization. With such a reading, the importance of promoting a new language (a new *wen*) but also new “civilized” or “Western” social practices and patterns²⁴ (*wen* in one of its original sense) by the most famous activist of the *xin wenhua yundong* would be clearly put under a new light. It, for example, clearly applies to Zhang Dongsun’s affirmation that the *wenhua* movement had as its main aim promoting education (*guangyi de jiaoyu* 廣義的教育) (Zhang 1919c). In 1920, Jiang Menglin also defined the “raging tide of *xin wenhua*” as something similar to the European Renaissance. It was mainly focused on education (*jiaoyu* 教育) and scholarly knowledge (*xueshu* 學術) (Jiang 1919). In those utterances it appears clear that *wenhua* did not mean “culture” in

24 See notably the discussion around civilizing the emotion of the Chinese people in Messner (2015).

its contemporary anthropological sense, but “a patrimony of ‘works’ (*œuvres*) to preserve, to diffuse, or in reference to which one positions oneself” (de Certeau 1974, 167). Keeping in mind that the “(re)new(ed) culture” was understood as a body of knowledge, and how to express this would give more force to a strand of academic literature that stresses that the literary revolution was the core or even the origin of the May Fourth and New Culture Movements (e.g. Geng 2015, 234; Xie 2017, 166). As such, one could even make the point that the problem is not located in the difficulty in understanding what Chinese activists meant when using each specific term—for this is exactly what scholarship is supposed to find out—but in the inappropriateness or fuzziness of our contemporary vocabulary to translate, denote, or explain them. One could wonder whether Philippe Bénéton was not right when he wrote in his history of the term “culture” that it would be a good idea to simply get rid of this term for the sake of clarity (Bénéton 1975, 149).

Returning to the conceptual history of *wenhua*, we have said that like in Japan and Korea, the notion of *wenhua* was at first understood as “civilization”. Indeed, the American missionary William A. P. Martin, who was the director of the *Tong-wenguan* 同文館, used the word *wenhua* as a translation of “civilization” (Huang 2011, 5). The first time *wenhua* was used in a Chinese-foreign language dictionary, in 1913 (*A Modern Dictionary of the English Language Translated into Chinese* 1913, 114), it was again a translation of “Civilization, n., the state of being civilized”. If we check the first texts mentioning the word *wenhua* in the *New Youth* journal one must admit that it did not cover the entire semantic realm of “culture”, only the ergologic division between nature and culture (see notably Tao 1917). In those texts it meant “civilization” as a universal process that leads man out of his state of nature. With each passing year, it started, however, to take a more spiritual connotation. In 1920, Chen Qixiu wrote that the word *wenhua* “designates the progress and the amelioration of the spiritual life of individuals and society” (Chen 1920, 1), a meaning still very close to what Fukuzawa Yukichi had coined for *bunmei* in Japan (Fukuzawa (1875) 1967, vol. 4, 3). A progressive distancing of *wenhua* from *wenming* seems to have started with the 1917–1918 debate between Chen Duxiu and the editors of the *Eastern Miscellany*.²⁵ During the exchanges, *wenhua* emerged as a competing notion used to criticize “modern” and not simply “Western civilization”. And the intellectuals who started to use the term *wenhua* endowed to the Chinese the mission to save the entire universal and modern civilization (see Li 1919, and Liang 1920a). They proclaimed a Chinese *Sonderweg* (Meissner 1994) that bears many resemblances with the utopian aspiration of German *Kulturkritik*. It is only in 1921 that we can really find in a text by Chen Jiayi the operative use of the term of *wenhua* closer to our contemporary

25 For a general presentation, cf. Jenco 2013; Wang 2013 and Ciaudo 2016, 214–36.

totalistic understanding of it. Chen defined it as "the ensemble of spiritual phenomena of our nation" (Chen 1921, 299–300, note 1). He furthermore distinguished the term from the logic of "going back to Antiquity" (*fugu* 復古) and from the rules and social systems implemented by the first Chinese emperors (*di-anzhang zhidu* 典章制度).

One can say that from that time on emerged two tendencies, that supplemented the more classical understanding of a body of texts and knowledge: 1) the anthropologically inclined attempt to see in *wenhua* the totality or the form (*Gestalt*) of the spirit shared by a nation/people; and 2) the relocalization of *wenhua* as a field of experience distinguished from other fields such as the political, the economic, *le culturel* or *der Kulturbereich*. Indeed, *wenhua* was not a totalistic concept for people like Chen Duxiu or Luo Jialun (Luo 1920) who clearly separated a *wenhua* movement and a social movement. From the 1920s on, Chen only used *wenhua* in this reduced sense, limiting it to the domain of arts and knowledge, understood as distinct from politics and economics (Huang 2006, 27–28). But here again we cannot simply put the radicals on one side, and the more conservative ones on the other.²⁶ Zhang Junmai, for instance, sometimes used *wenhua* as a field like Chen (Zhang 1921, 311–12), and sometimes as a totalistic notion. It seems that no intellectual succeeded in clearly imposing a precise definition for this term. The border between *wenming* and *wenhua* remained very porous during the Republican Era. As with any concept, *wenhua* was no univocal term. The marketization of *wenhua* and *xin wenhua* by the editorial world also complexified these potential ambiguities, because, as noted by Forster, they used it to market everything and anything.

This leads me to a last remark. The vocabulary and the meaning associated with the different compounds used by the intellectuals was still far from being established in the mid-1920s. The famous text of Hu Shi, "Our Opinion toward the Modern Western Civilization", in which he articulated perhaps in the most systematic manner his plea for the Westernization of Chinese society, is notable here. This text was first published in Japanese (Hu 1926a), before being made available for a Chinese readership (*ibid.* 1926b). However, by comparing the content, one can note a clear discrepancy between the two versions. In Japanese, Hu Shi uses *bunmei* and *bunka* in a very fluid manner without really questioning their meanings. In contrast, the Chinese text opens up what Hu Shi wanted to be authoritative definitions of the terms *wenming* and *wenhua*. Considering that the Chinese discussion was going nowhere because of a lack of precision in the terms,

26 See the problem of the notion of culture and its links with conservatism, as studied by Axel Schneider (2010).

he took on himself, probably with a particular agenda, to define once and for all what *wenhua* and *wenming* were in Chinese—something less needed in Japanese. Such a situation should alert us to the problem of the multiplicity of readings that permitted all May Fourth intellectuals' participation in the *xin wenhua yundong*, while not agreeing on its definition. In short, since Chinese intellectuals did not agree on what “*wenhua*”²⁷ was, was it even possible for them to agree on a *xin wenhua*?

Conclusion

As has become obvious after the historiographical considerations set out above, the potential re-evaluations of what was/were the (Re)New Culture(?) Movement(s) are far from being over. Elizabeth Forster rightly pointed it out that “the New Culture Movement meant, or was made to mean, different things for different people” (Forster 2017, 1257). This situation can be explained because it was a *Schlagwort* employed in editorial and political battles, but also because there was much ambiguity concerning the meaning of the compound *wenhua*. Intellectuals rarely specified what this “*wenhua*” was; they kept talking about, and many possibilities were at hand. Furthermore, it is not because a writer wrote this term with a specific and clear-cut idea in his mind that his readers understood it in this sense. Let us remember that Chinese intellectuals with different European educational backgrounds did not understand the terms “culture” and “civilization” in the same manner if they had received their educations in Germany, France, Great Britain, the United States or Japan. Furthermore, these Chinese debates took place just at the end of the First World War, after a period in which the German *Kulturkritik* discourse went to war, by claiming the superiority of the German *Kultur* over Western *Civilization*, while the French claimed that they were fighting “to defend Civilization” (Beßlich 2000; Beßlich and Agard 2018).

Thus, one really needs to question whether “culture” is always an appropriate term to understand the intellectual debates over *xin wenhua*. We tend to forget that it is too ambivalent and covers too large a semantic field that changes from one European language to another to be a very apt heuristic notion. I would argue that by translating *xin wenhua* as “new culture” we have sometimes blurred the picture instead of making it clearer. I do not believe that there is an ideal translation for

27 One should also clearly point to the fact that Chinese intellectuals were completely aware that they were fighting a war over vocabulary, and that the precise definitions of *wenhua* and *wenming*, and their semantic historical and transnational contexts, were of key importance, see notably the reply of Zhang Shenfu 張申府 (1893–1986), alias Zhang Songnian, to the above-mentioned article by Hu Shi (Zhang 1926)

that term, and as I already pointed out above, the polysemic term “culture” could be very appropriate to render *wenhua* as it is also polysemic. Yet, a key issue is that scholarship has long tended to regard *wenhua* as a translation of a Western concept of “culture” without considering the difficulties that faced Chinese intellectuals in their appropriation of the Western vocabulary,²⁸ nor the very complex transnational history of the concepts at hand. Hence, writing a full-scale history of the cluster of concepts that articulated what we would nowadays locate under the semantic field of “culture” appears to be a necessity if we want to grasp what was going on in these debates on the terms of those involved. More thorough attention should be given to the many *Schlagworte* that were deployed during this period, and how they affected ongoing debates, but we could also investigate the broader socio-linguistic aspect of words, concepts and constructions during this time²⁹. A much more systematic exploration of the web of connections between people who read and wrote about these terms is also required, as this paper could not explore extensively all the productions of the time. Of course, these are projects that would go far beyond this paper, and that would require the collaboration of many colleagues. For the time being, the author of the present paper finds solace in the thought that his potential readers may wish to delve into these tremendous tasks. My goal with his article, still plagued with many loose ends, was not to give a definitive answer to the problem, but rather to raise awareness and fire new questions, in short, to open a discussion. With the one-hundredth anniversary of May 4th already behind us, it is probably the time to approach its historical reality seriously by giving full attention to the terms used by its participants, except if we want to continue employing the expression “New Culture Movement” as a *Schlagwort* with a contemporary political purpose.

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28 A topic that has notably been studied in the context of the translation of scientific terms (see notably Wright 1998; Lackner, Amelung, and Kurtz 2001; Elman 2009).

29 Ivo Spira’s (2015) work on “-ism” (*zhuyi* 主義) has already shown the relevance of this type of inquiry to our understanding of the intellectual debates as well as their political and social ramifications.

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