

## INTRODUCTION

### THE DISCOURSE OF MODERNITY IN CHINESE CULTURE

In traditional China, Confucian scholars repeatedly stated, “Wen yi zaidao” or “Writing must carry the Tao” (*Tao* here means principle, moral, ethics).<sup>1</sup> During the twentieth century, many of their descendants, modern Chinese intellectuals, have explicitly rejected this concept in the process of modernization (or westernization). For better or worse, however, they still remain committed to the Tao – even in their “pure” and “apolitical” cultural productions. In most of these cases, the “purity” is mainly resistance to the dominant ideology, as in the school of “art for art’s sake” (*wei yishu de yishu*) in the May Fourth movement near the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> and the Fifth Generation cinema, with their formal experiments, at the century’s end. Through the imperial examination system, which translated scholarly excellence into political success, members of the elite class in traditional China assumed high office, which ideally carried with it heavy moral responsibilities. Partly thanks to this tradition, Chinese intellectuals have always been particularly self-conscious about their moral roles. Traditional scholars of the past dynasties in general used the expression “Tao” in this specific context to refer to Confucian ethics. Since the May Fourth movement, although the phrase sounds outmoded, if not downright reactionary, modern intellectuals still implicitly but self-consciously carry their Tao(s) in their own ways. Carrying the Tao in a modern context often means to spread the discourse of modernity in order to contribute to the modernization process in China.<sup>3</sup> In its ambiguity, this discourse can be articulated from different or even opposite perspectives, from communism to liberal humanism.

In his “Beyond Eurocentrism,” Enrique Dussel attributes the origin of modernity, which established the central position of Europe in relation to the rest of the world, to European expansion in Amerindia at the end of the fifteenth century. In other words, the conquest of the new continent stimulated the industrial revolution, not the other way around, as is commonly assumed, since it demanded “*efficacy*, technological ‘factibility’ or governmentalism of the management of an enormous world system in expansion.” As a result, the “new philosophical paradigm” of the Enlightenment is “the expression of a necessary process of *sim-*

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*plification* through ‘rationalization’ of the life-world, of the subsystems (economic, political, cultural, religious, etc.)”<sup>4</sup> Despite its often ambiguous nature and emphasis on changes, the centrality of the Western world in the discourse of modernity has essentially remained unchanged – albeit it has been challenged. Throughout the centuries, the West has represented itself as the only “modern civilization,” according to whose standard the rest of the world needs to be “modernized” or “civilized.”<sup>5</sup> Embedded in the discourse of modernity, this “invisible center”<sup>6</sup> has penetrated educational systems in various countries, which have been to different degrees “modernized.” This modernization process has often originated in violence, as in the case of European expansion into Amerindia.

In the same vein, the origin of Chinese modernity can be traced to the First Opium War in 1839–42. Because this war radically disrupted the traditional economic and social structure, it was the catalyst for a sea change on the cultural and the ideological front in China.

On August 29, 1842, at the end of this war, the Qing government and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Nanjing. In this first of a series of unequal treaties, China was forced to cede Hong Kong to Britain, to open five ports to British trade and residents (Guandong, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai), and to pay twenty-one million Mexican dollars to cover the cost of war for the British Indian government as well as for the loss of opium by British merchants.<sup>7</sup> Since then, Britain, other Western powers (America, France, Germany, Russia), and Japan, following the same lucrative model, repeatedly engaged in wars against China, through which they imposed similar treaties upon their weaker and weakened opponent.<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, this practice had devastating effects on the Chinese economy and directly and indirectly triggered civil unrest in the heart of the ancient continent.

For historians trained on the mainland, the principal motivation for Britain to start this war was deceptively simple. In order to eliminate their trade deficits, the British empire forced the Qing rulers to accept their opium trade from India, since it was the single most profitable trade available to their merchants in China, whose confinement policy made any other British trade difficult.<sup>9</sup> Some sinologists in the West offered different interpretations. John Fairbank, for example, attributed the cause of this war mainly to the “tributary system,” a “sinocentric world order,” and the Qing government’s “inertia.”<sup>10</sup> James Polachek named this the “inner Opium War” (his book title), since he believed that “sinocentric ideological arrogance” among various factions of radically “xenophobic” Qing officials provoked this war.<sup>11</sup> Apparently, these historians were oblivious to the fact that the British government fought this war on China’s territory mainly for its trading privileges, including the privilege of selling opium to the Chinese. Regardless of how ignorant the Qing government might have been regarding the great Western civilization, did British officials in China show any willingness to understand their host country? Like Friday in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, the slave must learn his master’s language to qualify as a potential human being, whereas

the master justifiably ignores his slave's language and culture, which are beneath his noble attention.<sup>12</sup> Fairbank compared China's situation with Japan's successful modernization in order to make it bear more responsibility for its failure in this East–West encounter.

Taiwan's economic miracle during the 1970s and 1980s, along with similar developments in several other Asian countries, can be considered an extension and reoccurrence of the Japanese model in twentieth-century Asia. This success model, however, which has indeed improved "people's livelihood" (*minsheng*) in Taiwan – as Sun Zhongshan put it at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>13</sup> – has also brought about complicated social and cultural problems in the rapidly "modernized" Taiwan society. Since the dependence on Western investments for economic development has further reinforced the cultural hierarchy between the East and West, modernization of the national economy has been accompanied by the westernization of cultural values. The crisis caused by cultural and axiological clashes is one of the favorite topics for Taiwan New Cinema directors.

Although Chinese and Western historians largely differ in their interpretations of the Opium War (some younger-generation historians in this country have adopted a "China-centered approach"),<sup>14</sup> they do share much common ground. Partly based on Marx's interpretation of this part of history, Chinese historians often emphasized popular resistance to British invaders as an expression of nationalist awareness. Prasenjit Duara rightly points out that, at an early stage of Chinese modernity, the history of modern China has already been "narrativized in the Enlightenment model," "the linear, teleological model," under the influence of the global discourse of social Darwinism.<sup>15</sup> Either defending the anti-imperialist history of Chinese people or blaming the Qing government for provoking the Opium War, both Chinese and Western historians have in fact attributed a negative role to Chinese cultural tradition. "The preoccupation with the utopia of modernity in the Chinese narrative of History, its role as the only standard of value, closed off much that its older histories, narratives, and popular cultures had to offer."<sup>16</sup> For Fairbank or Polachek, "the generally conservative drifts of central-government leadership,"<sup>17</sup> namely, the Qing government, personified China's past; whereas for most historians in China, people's struggles against Western imperialists showed a great progress toward modernity, and their awakening nationalism marked a radical break from their feudal past. In short, for both Western and Chinese historians, Chinese tradition was the designated villain in the Opium War. In addition, historical interpretations of this period in China have been shaped by Karl Marx's writings on this subject.<sup>18</sup> Despite his anti-imperialist stance, Marx often uses racist expressions, such as "barbarous" and "hereditary stupidity," to describe Chinese culture and people.<sup>19</sup>

According to a social Darwinist logic embedded in historical records of modern China on both sides of the ideological arena, China has its cultural tradition, which may be either glorified or nullified, but westernization represents its only

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future in the modern world. Following this implicit logic, if Chinese want to survive in the modern world, they must identify with the Western value system in the modernization process. At the same time, the differentiation of various stages of progress in human societies also allowed modern Chinese intellectuals to establish a racial hierarchy within their own culture, based on a division of relatively modernized, progressive, mainstream Han Chinese majorities and allegedly primitive, backward, marginalized ethnic minorities. Therefore, although modern Chinese intellectuals occupied peripheral positions vis-à-vis their Western counterparts internationally, the same racial hierarchy helped them preserve their central positions within their own nation facing the ethnic Other. Duara demonstrated how Chinese revolutionaries and reformers at an early stage “absorbed the international discourse of racist evolutionism.”<sup>20</sup> The influence of this discourse still is visible in contemporary China, as in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s two minority films in the mid-1980s.<sup>21</sup> According to this linear model of “universal” history, the Chinese premodern past, which includes complicated layers of various traditions, has been reduced to a vague notion of Chineseness. This Chineseness, often simplistically identified with Confucianism, has been implicitly or explicitly perceived as an obstacle to progress in the modernization process by various generations of reform-minded Chinese intellectuals. In this book I focus on how the racist evolutionist discourse has influenced modern Chinese intellectuals’ self-perceptions vis-à-vis the Western world. Globally, this self-perception is often implicitly and explicitly associated with an endorsement of the racial hierarchy in the West, namely, admiration for Western power and contempt for the other third-world nonwhite populations, despite a camaraderie supposedly established among the oppressed nations. This general embrace of the cultural and racial hierarchy by Chinese intellectuals does not help them discard their past as a “mummy,” which was further dissolved by its contact with the West.<sup>22</sup> In a vicious circle, the more they position themselves as superior in the face of other races, the more they reinforce an inferiority complex regarding the supposed master race of the modern world, despite their resistance to the racial oppression from their own stance. As an epitome of modern technology and culture, contemporary new-wave Chinese cinemas on the mainland and in Taiwan exemplify at different levels the complex and complicated relationship between China and the West. The films I have chosen for the present work are both symptomatic of this cultural complex among Chinese intellectuals and representative of their resistance to Western cultural domination.

In the course of modern history, Chinese intellectuals have gradually embraced various discourses of modernity, hoping to modernize and thus empower their nation.<sup>23</sup> Early in the twentieth century, the May Fourth movement, considered the turning point of Chinese modernity and the Chinese equivalent of the European Enlightenment, used “complete westernization” (*quanmian xihua*) as one of its slogans. Initially promoted by Hu Shi, a May Fourth liberal intellectual, the slogan aptly summarizes the intellectual trend of this era.<sup>24</sup> At the same

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time, Lu Xun, the well-known May Fourth radical writer, created as a metaphor for China the image of an immense iron house.<sup>25</sup> In this windowless prison, almost everyone is in a deep sleep. An enlightened few who remain awake debate as to whether they should awaken their compatriots. They are not sure whether awakening them would lead to the desired destruction of this iron house, as a result of the collective effort of all the Chinese, or whether, more likely, this would merely force their countrymen to face their tragic end clearheadedly. Lu Xun's metaphor has had an everlasting influence on the educated class of the twentieth century. Despite his ideological differences, Hu Shi made a statement from a similar perspective: "China has five enemies: poverty, physical sickness, ignorance, corruption, and civil war. . . . Imperialism is not one of them, since an imperialist country cannot invade a nation free of these five evils. Why can't an imperialist country invade America or Japan?"<sup>26</sup> Ironically, the American continent had already been colonized, and Japan was the imperialist country in Asia. Like Lu Xun, modern intellectuals often perceive themselves both as insiders in China, victimized by the suffocating social environment, and as outsiders, due to their awareness of open space beyond their cultural horizon – namely, the West. Intellectuals of different generations have chosen this position partly because they attributed China's repeated military and political defeats in the international arena to cultural inferiority.

Despite the statements of these prominent intellectuals, this reasoning does not sound logical. How could the West's capacity to impose opium or unequal treaties upon China prove its cultural superiority? In fact, this argument is not too difficult to understand. Overwhelmed by the West's technological power, disoriented and humiliated by China's repeated defeats, Chinese intellectuals who asked themselves the reason for these defeats could no longer find an answer to this question in the value system of the "Middle Kingdom." Therefore, they looked beyond their cultural boundary – to the West – and found an answer in social Darwinism, the predominant global discourse at that historical moment. As a matter of fact, social Darwinism did not bring anything new to this world. Instead, it merely justified an old logic of "might makes right" in the name of natural law, which provided this logic with a scientific outlook.

James Pusey comments:

After the Opium War, Chinese had very slowly come to feel that China's armaments were inferior. Later, many had come to feel that China's political institutions were inferior. But now Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Yen Fu said that China's historians, philosophers, and scholars were inferior, seemingly that China's whole civilization was inferior – because China's "ancestors" were inferior. This was a loss of "faith in our fathers" probably more traumatic for Chinese than the post-Darwinian loss of "faith of our fathers" was for so many nineteenth-century Westerners.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, Pusey uses only the word "fathers" to describe either Chinese or Western ancestors – as if children (all of them male) could come into this world

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without mothers. Although this sounds absurd, Pusey's expressions accurately reveal the patriarchal nature of the modernization process in China. During the May Fourth period, for example, although women paid high prices for their connections to the modernization movement, their positions within this movement remained marginalized. Whenever there was an ideological or political backlash, as in the case of Jiang Jieshi's New Life movement, women were among the first to be punished for their suspected participation in the movement.<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, their suffering was a favorite subject for May Fourth male writers; on the other, women were rarely granted independent spaces within this movement. Moreover, feminist positions articulated by women writers were criticized by their male counterparts for lacking social commitment to the "universal standard" of national salvation.<sup>29</sup> In other words, women could function as *objects* of salvation in the new patriarchal order, but they could not face their (male) saviors as *subjects* on an equal footing. Despite its patriarchal undertone, Pusey's statement identifies an important difference between Western "original" and Chinese belated modernity. If social Darwinism secularized the Western world by undermining the Christian faith of its modern inhabitants, it forced Chinese intellectuals at the early stage of modernization to adopt a much more iconoclastic attitude toward their cultural heritage. Considering their cultural tradition as "unsuited" to the modern world, these intellectuals tried their best to reject it radically, despite, or because of, their close ties to this tradition.

At the turn of the century, especially after Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* in 1898,<sup>30</sup> social Darwinism was in vogue among intellectuals of various ideological backgrounds, such as Sun Zhongshan, perceived by the Nationalist government as the father of the Republic of China,<sup>31</sup> and Chen Duxiu, founder of the Communist Party.<sup>32</sup> As part of the package of the discourse of modernity, the explanation of China's troubles according to social Darwinism follows the fetishistic logic of the capitalist market economy.<sup>33</sup>

According to this logic, military, economic, and technological power are an expression of cultural excellence. As a result, Western imperialism is implicitly not only justified but also to a degree glorified in the name of a law of nature, the "survival of the fittest." Since this logic equates military power with cultural excellence, the Chinese elite felt that, despite their deep resentment toward Western imperialism, they needed first of all to undergo a radical cultural change, to become westerners, or at least westernized, to overcome their (acknowledged or implied) cultural inferiority. Only then would they be able to play leading roles in modernizing China, which would empower their nation in the international arena. Partly for this reason, reformers and revolutionaries in modern Chinese history often describe their political and ideological movements as "cultural." The May Fourth movement is also called the New Culture movement (*xin wen-hua yundong*); Mao Zedong named his last grandiose political gesture the Cultural Revolution. In the same vein, torn between attachment to their cultural roots and eagerness to modernize their nation, Chinese intellectuals have examined



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their own cultural tradition from modernized or westernized perspectives. Despite their changing perspectives, one factor has remained constant: The perspective of a modern Chinese intellectual is often inherently self-contradictory, since he<sup>34</sup> occupies the position of both the viewing subject, as enlightened by Western culture, and the viewed object, as partially a product of the Chinese cultural tradition. Caught between his imaginary identification with the progressive West and his position as a citizen of an oppressed nation, the modern Chinese intellectual often vacillates between nationalism and rejection of his own cultural tradition.

Strictly speaking, there is no open space outside the Chinese iron house. To a greater or lesser degree, each culture (including America) has its own iron house, unless it is willing to give up its centrality based on a distinction between the “civilized us” and the “barbarian other,” because this imaginary centrality hinders a culture from adopting a genuinely open attitude toward its peers. As a matter of fact, one of the positive effects of the modernization process in China was to shake the Chinese conviction of their own centrality – as suggested by the name Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*). This process has replaced it with an invisible center, Eurocentrism, and substituted the discourse of modernity for the Tao of Confucianism. After having forced various cultures in the world to open their doors in the course of European economic and cultural expansion, the Eurocentrism embedded in the discourse of modernity has become one of the last iron houses, since it imprisons our ways of thinking by subsuming various value systems from diverse cultures under one ultimate reference. As in the case of China, however, this iron house is not as hopelessly claustrophobic as described by Lu Xun. Because of its ambiguous nature and open-endedness, the discourse of modernity has always been a double-edged weapon, even toward its own closure. Equality, one of the significant components of Enlightenment ideology, cannot help undermining and, in the final analysis, disrupting the centrality of the West, as marginalized cultural groups have begun to claim their rights following the same logic in a gradually shrinking world with a global economy.

The discourse of modernity has been able to maintain its dominant position in the world because it is backed by Western military, technological, and economic power; its disruptive function in regard to closures in other cultures also to an extent justifies its dominance in the eyes of reformers in these cultures. Since it has been able to initiate some much-needed changes, the discourse of modernity has made it easier for intellectuals in peripheral societies to embrace its logic. At the same time, because the modernization process always tends to replace the traditional native center (Confucianism, in the case of China) with its apparently more flexible invisible center, the modernization process in a third-world country often functions as “supplement”<sup>35</sup> or “pharmakon”<sup>36</sup> – to borrow Derridean expressions – which generates new problems by claiming to cure old sickness, as in the case of the Chinese socialist revolution and Taiwan’s recent rapid economic growth. One of the limitations of the discourse of modernity orig-

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inates precisely from its fetishistic equation of military and economic power with cultural excellence. On the one hand, this equation enables the modernization process to devalue and dismiss any differences existing in indigenous cultural tradition as not universal. Therefore, the process of modernization (or westernization) often has created a partially uprooted community as its by-product. On the other hand, this logic hinders normal communication between the supposed center and its periphery. Today, this fetishism still prevails in the nationalist expressions of third-world countries as well as other instances. For example, after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, I returned to China. Most of the Chinese friends to whom I spoke could not believe that the bombing might be a mistake. They repeatedly asked the same rhetorical question: “How could Americans, citizens of the most technologically powerful country, make such a stupid mistake?” Although my friends were neither blind believers of the party’s nationalist propaganda nor unexposed to the global economy, they still believed in American infallibility.

To different degrees, consciously or unconsciously, as third-world intellectuals we also bought into this fetishistic logic embedded in the discourse of modernity. Writing in English, the “universal” language of modernity (although my mother tongue is spoken by the greatest number of people in the world) and from the perspectives of American academicians, how can we, instead of continuing to spread Eurocentrism embedded in the discourse of modernity, contribute to its deconstruction? Enrique Dussel suggests “transmodernity” as an alternative to modernity or even postmodernity.<sup>37</sup> Transmodernity emphasizes cross-cultural exchanges instead of one-way changes imposed by the center upon its periphery. In order to become transmodern ourselves, however, we need first of all to decolonize our own ways of thinking. That’s partly why I have chosen contemporary Chinese (and Taiwanese) new-wave films to study here, since I feel certain affinities with their positions in my native culture, despite gender and geopolitical differences. After all, we are using “languages” (English or visual language) that are to varying extents considered “imported” in our native land and “universal” in global culture. Criticism of their works on my part is also an attempt to overcome my own limits. It is an attempt at self-decolonization.

**CULTURAL TRADITION AND THE MODERNIZATION PROCESS**

Although intellectuals have played a crucial role in spreading the discourse of modernity in China during the twentieth century, their relationship with this discourse has always been ambiguous. At the end of the century, because their societies have been considerably modernized, Chinese intellectuals on both sides of the Taiwan Strait must rethink their own relationships with the local versions of the discourse of modernity, while facing the consequences of modernization. Modernity, which is no longer an abstract idea, has become for them part of daily reality in the era of globalization. In different ways, modernization processes



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have deeply shaped the concept of Chinese culture on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to the point that the same concept may refer to entirely different value systems.

Due to its youth, imported nature, and dependence on technology, cinematic representation has been closely associated with the discourse of modernity. In the course of modern Chinese history, filmmakers have generally been perceived as “modern,” somewhat “avant-garde,” and often “westernized.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, they use an arguably international language – visual language – as their means of expression. They speak, then, an international language that bears certain foreign characteristics. These qualifications are particularly applicable to the mainland Fifth Generation and the Taiwan New Cinema directors of the 1980s and 1990s, because both won international recognition while encountering box-office failures at home. Despite this *prima facie* resemblance, the two schools remain fundamentally different at both the formal and the ideological levels, shaped by their respective cultures, which are modernized in different ways. Given several decades of geopolitical segregation between mainland China and Taiwan, these differences are to be expected.

Mainland Fifth Generation and Taiwan New Cinema filmmakers occupy other similar territories in their respective societies as well. Coincidentally, the two schools obtained international recognition in the early 1980s. At least at the beginning of their careers, both mainland Fifth Generation and Taiwan New Cinema directors shared one piece of common ground: They were driven by their desires to transgress conventional filmic forms in their respective cultures. Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang on the mainland, and Hou Xiaoxian and Edward Yang (Yang Dechang) in Taiwan, went much further in this respect than most of their colleagues. To different degrees, one can say that they succeeded in creating their own cinematic “languages,” often defined against previous mainstream genres, namely, mainland socialist-realist and Taiwan escapist-melodramatic cinemas. This emphasis on formal innovation, partly inspired by postwar European cinemas, distinguishes them in the history of Chinese cinema, although in their later works they tend to pay less attention to formal experiment mainly due to commercial pressure, especially for the mainlanders. (Hou Xiaoxian, the well-known Taiwan director, however, has become more daring in some of his late films: *Puppetmaster*, for example.) In Parts I and II of this book, I have chosen to discuss the films of these four directors largely because of their success in subverting their respective filmic traditions. Part III is tied less to the notion of formal innovation than to that of globalization: Chapter 5, on the Zhang Yimou model, actually points out the end of formal innovation among Fifth Generation directors, for whom commercial concerns have become predominant in the era of globalization. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the impact of globalization on their respective societies.

I have chosen the works of these directors for another reason – their ages. The New Cinema and Fifth Generation filmmakers were born either right before or

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right after the victory of the Communist Party over the Nationalist government in 1949. This dramatic event has directly or indirectly caused great social changes on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. In various forms, these changes have left strong imprints on the lives and works of these directors. Although some directors of the next generation have also paid special attention to formal innovation (Cai Mingliang, for example), this radical transition has less impact on their works, whereas the works chosen in this book in a sense exemplify the transitional era at the social, ideological, and economic levels.

Born immediately after the advent of the People's Republic of China, the Fifth Generation directors grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Instead of continuing their high-school educations, most of these former Red Guards spent their formative years in the countryside as "educated youth" (*zhishi qingnian*).<sup>39</sup> In 1978, through a highly competitively national entrance examination, most Fifth Generation filmmakers entered the Film Academy as members of the first directing class in post-Cultural Revolution China. They made their first works in the midst of the post-Cultural Revolution ideological vacuum of the 1980s, during the collapse of communist ideology in China. On the one hand, these filmmakers are the descendants of the May Fourth movement at the beginning of the century. One of the important ideological components of the May Fourth movement was its radically antitraditional stance, exemplified by its famous slogan: "Smash the Confucian Temple" (*zalan kongjiadian*). The Chinese Communist Party, which had grown from the May Fourth movement, inherited its antitraditionalist agenda. Most Fifth Generation directors then inadvertently followed in the party's footsteps in this respect.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, as disillusioned offspring of socialist revolution, in their early works they constantly question and subvert communist ideology. Often, in order to reconcile their antitraditional stance and their subversive positions against the party, these directors associate the Communist Party with China's past, and reject both communist and Confucian value systems as two sides of the same traditional coin. Consequently, their subversive acts take on much broader and more complex cultural dimensions than the mere criticism of communist ideology.

Following the defeat of the Nationalist government, which led to the exodus of its adherents from mainland China to Taiwan, New Cinema directors were born either in mainland families in exile, or in Taiwanese families under the leadership of a minority government.<sup>41</sup> At first glance, the distinction between the Taiwanese (*bensheng ren*) and the mainlanders (*waisheng ren*) seems arbitrary. The line of demarcation is drawn on the basis of date of arrival in Taiwan, namely, whether a family, who had in most cases come from mainland China anyway, settled in Taiwan before or after the end of the half-century Japanese occupation in 1945.<sup>42</sup> Despite its arbitrariness, this distinction has deeply affected Taiwan society at different levels, due in part to the political interests of the governing party. Unlike the mainland Communist government, the Nationalist government categorically rejected the May Fourth antitraditional agenda, which it perceived