

The Dimensions of Nationalism: A Case Study of the U.S. in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This article seeks a new understanding of nationalism theory by comparing the historical evolution of American and Chinese nationalism, analyzing the cosmopolitan origins of the two nations in different historical contexts. Although modern American and Chinese nation were born in different time and space, their nationalism has a similarly ideological origin which can be traced back to universal ideal based on regionally cultural community. Different with American nationalism that cut off the cosmopolitan traditions of Atlantic Republic of Letters, using localism of evangelical ideology as a national binder, modern Chinese nationalism was born in the collapse of traditional Tian-xia state, under the pressure from European nation-states theory based on national model from Atlantic world in the late of nineteenth century.

Keywords: nationalism, modern history, early American republic, imperial China

1. Introduction

As a modern phenomenon, nationalism attracted scholars' interest since the middle of twentieth century. In their studies, Hans Kohn and Carlton Hayes made a clear line between two different catalog which is divided into western and eastern nationalism. Although their understandings based on special European experience in World War II that witnessed democratic struggle for inclusiveness in western Europe and ethnic dictatorship for exclusiveness in eastern Europe respectively (Calhoun, 2005: 1), such dichotomy still became an authoritative criteria in modern political studies which emphasized by John Plamenatz, who divided nationalism into civic and ethnic. (Jaskulowski, 2010: 290)

Since the nationalism dichotomy was established on the basis of European experience in World War II, their interpretations are not suit to the multi-ethnic nations like the United States and China. For the United States, some scholars either considered American nationalism as a reproduction of British nationalism (Hastings, 1997: 5), or believed that "Nationalism is unknow" in the United States. (Trautsch, 2016: 290). Others still use European dichotomy, believed that it is a civic nationalism like western European nations. For example, according to Noah Pickus, although nationalism at the beginning was "simultaneously the source of exclusion and a bulwark against it", American civic nationalism finally revived at the end of millennium. (Pickus, 2005: 63, 125). For China, although scholars focused on its distinctiveness, they either twisted Chinese nationalism by criticized it as a communist religion from civic perspective (Kuo, 2017), or believed that modern Chinese nation experienced a shift from civic to ethnic nationalism that represented by the national identity of Han majority. (Duara, 2016: 421).

Compared with China, scholars recently provided a new interpretation of American nationalism from historical perspective: First of all, American nationalism was never a single, static model, but a "dynamic and diverse reality"; secondly, origins of American nationalism should be understood in "interregional and international connections". (Park, 2018: 6) Based on this understanding, historians becoming to study the interactions of race, religion, and politics in historical progress of the United States, emphasized cultural tensions that helped to shape the plural American nationalisms instead of the national myth created by American Revolution. (Blum, 2005). On the other hand, some historians focus on the interaction between the United States and Atlantic world, believed that American nation was born in the Atlantic revolution along with modern democracy, emphasized the transatlantic origins of American nationalism. (Martin, 2013)

The new understandings of nationalism are based on the cultural perspective of the term "nation". As a modern definition, "nation" always lived in the shadow of "state", overlap or conflict with it in different situations. This confused overlap is

caused by contemporary policy makers who simplified “nation building” as “democratization” of rebuilding state. (Wimmer, 2018: 2). More specifically, the emphasis on the importance of a democratic state instead of an inclusive nation is developed by American political theorists after the Cold War. In the end of 1991, former U.S. officials Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner provided “failed state” theory. According to them, there are two kinds of states “whose survival is threatened”: failed states like Bosnia, failing states like Georgia with independent states which belonged to former Soviet. After that, Robert Rotberg made a comparison between failed and strong state. According to him, “strong states offer high levels of security from political and criminal violence, ensure political freedom and civil liberties”. In short, strong state is a place “of enviable peace and order”. (Rotberg, 2004: 4). Almost at the same time, Francis Fukuyama explained his understanding of “strong state”, believed that a strong state means a powerful democratic institution which is represented by the United States, thus leading to a totally turn in state theory from co-existence of state imagination and state entity to a materially democratic institutional system represented by American model. (Fukuyama, 2004: 6).

After Afghan and Iraq wars led by the United States, scholars started to rethink the overemphasis on institutions in state theory, reexplore the cultural perspective, consider state as an integration of different social ideas. In their opinions, state is not defined as an “organization capable of autonomous action”, but a “configuration in which human actors act”. (Vu, 2010: 150). As a response to the new understandings, American historians pointed out the institutionalist state is an obstacle to American state history, since it is “unstoppable, impenetrable, autonomous and mechanically bureaucratized”. (Sparrow, Novak and Sawyer, 2015: 4). In fact, cultural approach of state theory can be traced back to Antonio Gramsci who argued that the hegemonic culture created by class actors in civil society is the key for understanding state formation. In the late of 1960s, Gramsci’s idea was supported by British Marxist Nichos Poulantzas. According to him, state is not a material entity, but the relationship of forces which conflict against each other in modern society. (Brooke, Strauss and Anderson, 2018: 5-8). After that, British historical sociologist Philip Abrams provided a clearer division between material and cultural state. According to him, state is consisted of “state-system” including central government and “state-idea” which make sure the legitimization of state power. He believed that the state is “not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice”, but “the ideological device in terms of which the political institutionalization of power is legitimated”. (Abrams, 1988: 82).

The cultural turn of state theory thus providing a possibility to distinguish “nation” from “state”, adjust conflicts inside “nation” and “nationalism”. In other words, nation both as a “community of sentiment” represented by a plural forms and “a political project” that always a one-way sociological process will achieve mediation in a “cultural state”. (Lemay-Hebert, 2009: 34, 35). By emphasizing legitimacy rather than institution in recent state theory, relationship between “state” as a “configuration in which human actors act”, “nation” as an “imagined community” and “nationalism” which is a multiple identities of “nation” thus achieving a logical adjustment.

The revival of cultural state during last decades provided a new understanding for historians to reorganize American national history in a time which experienced “the absence of a sense of the state” (Skowronek, 1982: 5), building a perfect connection between historical development of American nation and modern American state. However, the similar understanding was rejected by historians in China studies. For instance, “New Qing History”, a famous school attempted to reinterpret the history of Qing —last Chinese dynasty, believed that Qing empire is absolutely different with “China” which is simplified as territories of Han majority. (Rawski, 1996). In fact, their reinterpretation is aimed at Sinicization theory which believed that the successful conquest of Qing relied on their acceptance of Han culture. (Ho, 1967: 191). As two totally opposite theories, they respectively focused on Chinese state as a material entity within modern nation-state framework and an imagined community by overemphasizing the relationship between Han culture and Chinese nation, ignored cultural tensions connect the two poles of it which was born in the early twentieth century. Therefore, recent scholars provided a new interpretation of “China”, examined the dynamic development in ideological history of “China” and the creation of modern Chinese national identity. (Zhao, 2006).

In this article, I make a simple comparison between American and Chinese nationalism, based on recent works both in America and China, focus on the historical context which provided a dynamic tension for both nations. I believed that both American and Chinese nationalism born in the conflicts between cosmopolitanism and localism in early modern world. Different with the United States, China have to face the conflicts between a material entity of a unified Chinese nation and a traditionally cultural community that beyond China under the pressure of western modernity in the late of eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

2. Cosmopolitan Origins of American Nationalism in the Age of Revolutions

In her recent article, Susan-Mary Grant posed a question of the nature of American nationalism. In her opinion, different with western Europe that nationalism born in a powerful central state, “both nationalism and state-formation in America happened in reverse order”. In other words, American state emerged after the rise of American nationalism, “state” is a

response to the demands of American nationalism. (Grant, 2016: 397).

Although she provided a new understanding of the relationship between state and nation, American nationalism is neither a “nationalist ideology invoked by state-ruling elite”, nor a single emotions “expressed by populace as a whole”. In other words, there is no such a single nationalism which provided the legitimacy for American state. During American Revolution, founding fathers of the United States explained the “natural rights” of American people, use it to empower the legitimacy of the revolutionary actions. Since 1960s, many scholars focused on the evolution of nature rights theories including natural law and “state of nature”, believed that American national identity was based on the expressions of political buildings of “natural rights” and a set of imaginations about “nature” which come from American people. In their narratives, natural rights supplied by the sublimity of puritan’s dream. The organic combination of religious faith and political theory thus creating a great nation that different with any western state. For many scholars, “it is Nature’s nation, possessing a heart that watches and receives” by Americans, become the fundamental basis of American nationalism. (Miller, 1967: 201; Zuckert, 1996).

Based on this understanding, some scholars provided another similar explanation about American nationalism. According to them, there is a universal value paradigm that united American citizens since the creation of the Republic. Cited from Jean Jack Rousseau, they believed that this universal values paradigm connected two pillars of American national identity: on the one hand, civic understanding of the natural rights which come from Enlightenment philosophy, and promoted by American founding fathers in *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*; on the other hand, the sacred faith that America would arise as a kingdom of heaven on the earth, thus different with old, decayed European nations. Under their explanations, state ideas both from secular community and religious society united under such paradigm which was named as “civil religion”, achieved the reorganization of different identities from both free Americans and slaves, Catholics and Evangelicals in American nation formation. (Wilsey, 2015).

In fact, like Institutionalists’ explanation of state building, the narratives of American national identity represented by “Nature’s Nation” or “Civil Religion” are both teleological demonstrations that attempt to create a unique, great United States existed in their own imaginations. The overemphasis on American exceptionalism formulated a single model of American nationalism, ignored the American social complexity on the one hand, cut off connections between American nation and the Atlantic world during the age of revolutions on the other. For historians, Atlantic world in the age of revolutions was not only an “arena of empires” (Ziesche, 2010: 3), but also a “republic of letters” in which different ideologies from different communities fought against, and finally shaped each other.

In his famous work, Habermas proclaimed that the development of state authorities since the late of seventeenth century leading to the rise of independent civil societies, created a space of ideas between state and society. Therefore, “the public of the now emerging public sphere of civil society” became the opponents of the old state power, leading to the creation of the modern state. (Habermas, 1989 :23). Although some scholars criticized Habermasian public sphere overemphasized the consensus of public opinion, “erases the dimension of antagonism”, ignored “the norm of inclusion was a fiction”, Atlantic public sphere in the eighteenth century actually was a universal “Republic of Letters” that crossed national borders. As an ancient phenomenon, “Republic of Letters” always served as an imagined space for “intellectual exchange and propagation of ideas”. (Dewald, 2004: 192). For intellectual historians, Republic of Letters provided a universal community, created a “utopian global literary world” connected learned men and women, established a “broader Federation” in the age of Enlightenment. (Winterer, 2012: 600; Brockliss, 2002: 19). More importantly, this “republic” expanded across Atlantic ocean, provided Americans who rejected a distinctive American identity “a way to participate in the nation without being transformed”. (Kaplan, 2008: 202). Therefore, Citizens in the early modern world were not only a citizen in a given territory. More importantly, they were citizens belong to a universal “Republic of Letters” that provided shared cosmopolitan values over the national boundaries. As Dena Goodman argued that, “those who participate in it have tried to work out a way of maintaining citizenship in the political and geographical states that define their nationality without compromising their primary allegiance to the values of the republic.” (Goodman, 1994: 2, 12-15). The double belonging of European citizens during that time provided a delicate balance between arising nation-states and cosmopolitan “Republic of Letters”.

The “Republic of Letters” and the extended public sphere in the late of eighteenth-century Atlantic world provided an ideally universal identity beyond different national identities, achieved the co-existence between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. In many cases, especially for the United States, cosmopolitanism in the Atlantic world provided a platform to imagine the American community, leading to a break of the localism boundaries existed in different areas. (Kermes, 2008: 3-4). However, the French Revolution broke this fragile balance. Revolutionaries were not satisfied with such co-existence, and not considered the public sphere as a buffer zone between state power and individual rights. In fact, they crossed both the boundaries of the Republic of Letters and the French State, redefined the meaning of “state” in the late of eighteenth century. They united cosmopolitanism and nationalism by a way that simply rejected the Enlightenment designs for a Republic of Letters as the mediated power to resist the invasion of state power. (Goodman, 1994: 296-297).

In their understandings, cosmopolitanism is not a mild utopia anymore, but a true republic of human beings that will achieve “universal human emancipation”. (Israel, 2014: 707). For this purpose, revolutionaries traveled around the Atlantic world, spread revolutions including both ideologies and revolutionary wars, departed “from the idealistic, peace-promoting universalism of the revolution’s earliest days”. (Polasky, 2015: 232).

The radically cosmopolitan practice of French revolutionaries twisted the natural development of Atlantic public sphere, eliminated the dual characteristic of citizenship during the early eighteenth century by subordinated it to the revolutionary cosmopolitan ideologies. The universal republic of letters thus became a weapon controlled by revolutionary government to destroy everything that was considered as an obstacle for “human emancipations”. Therefore, the dual characteristic of Atlantic citizenship including universalism and nationalism which supported each other became an absolute paradox. In order to achieve their cosmopolitan dream, it is necessary for revolutionaries to eliminate national borders, reorganize the whole Atlantic world. Such radicalism produced a dangerous tendency for the newborn state like the United States. Under the influence of revolutionary cosmopolitanism, “state” and “nation” became a term that lack of real meanings. Chaos of Atlantic world in the age of revolutions forced American social actors began to explain their own understandings about “American citizen”, reexamined their national identity from different ideologies including political philosophy, Christian theology, natural law and even literatures, leading to the creation of a plural American nationalism. (Hyde, 2018: 8)

3. Defining “American”: Creation of American Nationalism in the Age of Revolutions

Revolutionary cosmopolitanism in the late of 1790s was a violent shock to traditional nation existed in a combination of state power and Christian faith. American conservatives thus proclaimed a counter-attack to the radical secularism of French revolutionaries. For Federalists in the age of revolutions, American nation means a state isolated from European politics on the one hand, and a society united by Protestantism faith and principles on the other. In other words, Federalists’ explanation for American state legitimacy comes from the political exceptionalism and the Christian divinity. Therefore, they believed French state has already become a tool of radicals to conquer the world, considered it as a monster that would be used to control the whole Atlantic world, and create a revolutionary empire. (Sun, 2018: 71). Accordingly, they refused the fulfillment of the treaty of American and French Alliance, cooperated with British government to reject the expanding policies of the French government in Atlantic world, and described French revolutionaries as bloody Jacobins on the one hand, established a set of conspiracy theories depicted French revolutionaries as ambitious actors that want to destroy all the religious and governmental orders, thus achieving their rule to the human beings on the other. Such a conspiracy theory was confirmed by many Americans including George Washington during that time.¹ By excluding French revolutionaries and their ideologies from American society, Federalists expressed their own understandings about the state and its relationship with the emerging American nationalism. Therefore, “American encounters with Atlantic revolutions between 1789 to 1852 contributed to the development of national identity in the United States”, shaped a special model in different American nationalisms. (Cleves, 2011: 609).

Nevertheless, counter revolutions including both revolutionary practices and cosmopolitan ideologies was not the whole story of American nationalism. American social actors including Republicans attempted to break traditional social bonds which sustained by classic state and church. Under the influence of French political clubs, many organizations which were named as “Democratic-Republican societies” emerging from the United States in the mid of 1790s. In their understandings, American state was not a powerful central government, but a cooperator with American citizens in the public sphere through these organizations established by the people. In other words, democratic societies believed they were “mediating between the broader public and the government” which would limit state power, deliver it to other social actors. State governing was not a professional game that could only played by one actor whose name is government, but a serious book written by all the citizens in the society. (Martin, 2013: 90). Therefore, the broader understanding of the “state” by democratic societies leading to a more general definition of American nation. In their understandings, “Democracy” was not only meanings a democratic state which defined by popular participation of the politics. More importantly, it was a nation that would break all the limitations of superstitious power both from government and the church, especially for the religious superstitions.

Although the radical secularism of the United States has its origins in the European ideological history, the large-scale practice was achieved by Thomas Paine. In his famous pamphlet, Paine claimed that, American revolution which happened in the political system “would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion”. (Paine, 1879: 6). In fact, the aid of Paine’s religious revolution is the tendency of the cooperation between state and church in Federalists

¹ In 1798, George Washington written to his friend, claimed that the principle of Illuminati (an organization believed by many Americans that would destroy all of religions and social order) was spread to the United States, should be alarmed. See George Washington to G. W. Snyder, 25 September, 1798; George Washington to G. W. Snyder, 24 October, 1798, both in Abbot and Twohig, 1998: 555, 557.

government. Although the first Amendment forbid the establishment of a national church, it did not forbid the cooperation between the state and the church. More importantly, the separation between church and state is not the separation between nation and Christian religion. Actually, the pursue of state legitimacy by many American founding fathers was represented by the insist on Puritan principles. As Justice Joseph Story argued that when he attempted to explain the object of the first Amendment: “the general, if not the universal, sentiment in America was, that Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state, so far as was not incompatible with the private rights of conscience, and the freedom of religious worship”. (Story, 1833: 726). Therefore, Federalists and their supporters reorganized the relationship between American state legitimacy and Christian faith, using Protestantism to empower their government.²

In order to resist against Federalists’ seeking to a superstitious God represented by miracles in the Bible, American radical societies in the late of 1790s proclaimed another war in the religious field after their attack to the government. For the supporters of the French revolutionary ideologies, “America” means a nation that take off the bounds of superstitious miracles in the Bible, return to the “state of nature” which guided by a Nature’s God. “State of Nature” is a pretending situation in which human beings enjoy their privileges directly comes from natural rights. Unlike the British understandings about human’s natural situation which believed that citizens should give up their natural liberty in order to protect their civil liberty—an idea focus on the conflicts between two liberties, American founding fathers believed that civil liberty will be protected by the expansion of natural liberty. (Wilson, 1804: 458). This understandings about “state of nature” is used to justify the legitimacy of American revolution in 1770s. (Bradburn, 2009). In the age of revolutions, American radical philosophers believed that they should expand the “state of nature” from the political discussions to the spiritual world, achieve the second revolution in religious system proclaimed by Thomas Paine, thus establishing a comprehensive nature’s nation which not only existed in the past of American revolution, but will be represented by a totally secular society. Therefore, adherents of nature’s God attempting to establish their own societies, resist the control by orthodoxy churches to American society. “deism”—which was both an insult on adherents of nature’s God by conservative camp, and a skepticism faith response to Paine’s appeals in America, “was a complex cultural formation with its own particular social makeup, political profile, internal structure, and precarious place in the evolving relations of early national cultural power”. (Grasso, 2018: 99). Therefore, together with the radical democratic-republican societies, they were not only “defined specific boundaries of an American nationhood” by “exclude some individuals and groups from the democratic American nation”, but also defined a completely different American nationalism. (Mattes, 2015: 4).

Organized deists and their secular definitions of American nation in the late of 1790s initiated a larger movement by Evangelicals. Aimed at the expansion of natural religion which is the core notion of American deist’s nationalism to American spiritual world, protestants from different sects expressed their understandings about Christian “nature”. For instance, in his pamphlet, Elias Bondinot claimed that human beings could not understand nature by their own reason, only the miracles existed in the Bible would help them to explore the God’s nature. Natural God is just “a plastic hand of nature” that will bring chaos to American mind. (Bondinot, 1801: 40-41). In fact, Bondinot’s understanding about nature was the official ideology of Protestantism. Natural revelation, which believed that human beings could not find the true nature by reason because of the sin, was revised by Jonathan Edwards in early eighteenth century. Edwards and other evangelicals believed that the only way to find the nature was the exploration of the Bible which was considered as the revelation of the God. (McDermott, 1999: 211). Therefore, deist’s critics of Bible initiated the counter-attack by different sects. In front of a dangerous “invasion” by American deists, different protestant sects which always persecuted each other before the age of revolutions united under the banner of the Bible. As Eric Schlereth argued that, by defining their difference and sublimity, “general concepts of ‘Protestantism’ or even ‘Christianity’ provided the faithful a meaningful identity”, created a notion of “Christian nation”— Evangelical national identity which beyond the differences between denominations. (Schlereth, 2013: 11).

Therefore, American nationalism existed in different understandings of “American” in the age of revolutions. The failure of secularism, the spread of evangelicalism and a weak federal government of early American Republic established a special nation. The bond of this nation comes not from central government, but from the conflicts of different nation ideas.

4. Defining “Zhong Guo”: Historical Origins of Modern Chinese Nationalism

In the last part of her recent book, Evelyn S. Rawski provided an image of the conflicts between Chinese and Korean historians around the belonging of ancient Koguryo kingdom in 2004 and 2006. Rawski believed that, it is Chinese nationalism that “spurred international disputes” which “imputing a Chinese origin to the Korean people”. (Rawski, 2015: 242, 241).

² Recently, some scholars provided the similar understanding about that. They believed that Federalists achieved a special Establishment which actualized a cohesion of state legitimacy and Christian principles represented by a “Moral Establishment”, see Sehat, 2011: 54.

In fact, it is not the first time that historians criticize the “Chinese nationalism”. Twenty years ago, when Rawski addressed to the Association of Asian Studies, she declared that “interpretations of Qing (the last dynasty of China) lie at the foundation of contemporary Chinese nationalism”. Therefore, a group of scholars focused on the reinterpretation of Qing dynasty, attempted to understand its history beyond “China”. (Rawski, 1996: 831).

As a prominent school during last twenty years in Chinese studies, “New Qing History” aimed at classical interpretations of Qing dynasty which believed that the successful conquest of China by Manchu rulers relied on their “policy of systematic Sinicization” . (Ho, 1967: 191). For scholars of New Qing History, the Sinicization theory is no doubt an “idealized and distorted vision of a unified China”. Therefore, they believed that their duty as a historian is accelerate a “de-centered” Chinese history by asserting the “distinctiveness” of each ruling house. In their reinterpretations, ancient China is not a unified nation since the first dynasty created by Qin Shi Huang (First Emperor of Qin) at 221 BC, but divided by different empires, ruled by different ethnic groups who lived beyond the territory of “China”. In other words, only institutions and states created by Han people can be considered as “China”. (Rawski, 2015: 225).

Although Rawski and other New Qing History scholars provided a new perspective to understanding ancient Chinese history which beyond the limitation of the Sinicization theory that was considered as an expression of Han racial emotions, we still need to discuss some details about their reinterpretations so that we can understand Chinese “nationalism” in modern era: the evolution of “China” which was considered as Han people or Han civilization by New Qing historians; the relationship between distinctiveness and universality in Chinese history that is a key criteria for the continuity of “China”, the modern Chinese state legitimacy which is pursuit by the government and identified by the people.

“China” which pronounced as “Zhong Guo” in Chinese language is a complex term that have an independently evolutional progress. Before the Western Zhou (1045-771 BC), “Zhong Guo” referred to the capital of the King. After Song Dynasty (960-1297 AD), “Zhong Guo” became a term that asserted the distinctiveness of Chinese culture. (Yang, 2006: 2). Therefore, in ancient China, “Zhong Guo” is a cultural term more than political one.

In fact, the cultural definition of “Zhong Guo” was determined by Chinese worldview in ancient era and their understandings of ethnic groups. Ancient Chinese world is consisted of several different levels. The biggest world is “Tian Xia” which means “all under heaven”. In the Bronze Age of China, people who lived in “Tian Xia” was consisted of five parts: “Zhong Guo” in the central part, “Di” in the northern part, “Rong” in the western part, “Man” in the southern part, and “Yi” in the eastern part of “Tian Xia”. (Li, 2015: 25). Along with the integration of them, the people of “Tian Xia” was finally divided into several parts which is called “Hua” or “Xia” that lived in “Zhong Guo” and “Yi” lived beyond “Zhong Guo”. This relationship is understood as Han and non-Han people in western scholarship which is marked as a racial idea by their translation into “civilized” and “barbarian” . (Liu, 2004: 31-37). Although this dichotomy was always used by ancient Chinese rulers to make arrangement of their own territory, “Hua” and “Yi” was not an absolute relationship limited by geography or genealogy. The definition of “Hua” and “Yi” was determined by their identity of traditional moral principles and culture. As Q. Edward Wang argued that, “since the demarcation between the Han and the non-Han was based largely on cultural and social terms, the exact boundary was not always clear”. (Wang, 1999: 286). In other words, “Hua” and “Yi” can be transformed to each other by sharing a common moral principle or social behavior.

Based on this flexible understanding of the Chinese people, the boundaries between “Tian Xia” and “Zhong Guo” which is considered as a conflict by New Qing History scholars was also changeable and flexible. In other words, ancient Chinese state was neither a distinctive kingdom limited in a given territory, nor several different universal empires claimed by Rawski that beyond “China”. The history of “China” is not only the transformation from “Tian Xia” to “Zhong Guo” represented by the change from a cultural community to a modern nation, but also the transformation from “Zhong Guo” to “Tian Xia” which means “China” became a name referred to the “Tian Xia” that fused and integrated into a whole nation by different ethnic groups and dynasties in Chinese history.

In his famous book, Joseph Levenson discussed the relationship of “Tian Xia” and “Guo” or more specifically, “Zhong Guo”. He acknowledged that the respective means of the two terms are “not really revealed” in the “simple, self-sufficient English equivalents” by “empire” or “nation”, because “the definition of either term implies a reference to the other, a comparison with the other”. (Levenson, 1968: 99). In fact, “Tian Xia” is a complex idea both within and beyond “Zhong Guo”. On the one hand, a narrow “Tian Xia” (all under heaven) could be referred to the territories that directly controlled by Chinese emperors which is limited in “Zhong Guo”. On the other hand, “Tian Xia” is a speculative idea that refer to the known world in Chinese mind with comparatively unlimited boundaries. (Lv, 2013: 1). However, the broader “Tian Xia” is not just a kind of imagination but a “political community” that beyond the special dynasty, but a political ideal or cultural value which believed the peace and order would be achieved in such system. (Yu, 2010). As Chinese scholar Qian Mu argued that, the relationship between “Tian Xia” and “Zhong Guo(China)” is the “what is in the mind” and “what is seen and heard”. (Luo, 2008: 94).

Recently, the double nature of “Tian Xia” and its relationship with “Zhong Guo(China)” as a state idea in ancient China is

noticed by Japanese scholars. They focused on the titles of Chinese ruler, provided a new understanding for the nature of ancient Chinese state. In 1970s, Sadao Nishijima published his *Ancient Chinese State and the Northeastern Asia*, believed that there were two different titles used by Chinese emperor: “Huangdi”(commonly translated into emperor) and “Tianzi”(“son of the heaven”, or “governor of Tianxia”). Sadao believed that the different titles represented different rules of Chinese emperor, because the seals of emperors also divided by this dichotomy. The seals of “Huangdi”(emperor) was used to rule the territories directly controlled by emperor, that of “Tianzi” (son of heaven) was used to govern the other states who acknowledged the legitimacy of Chinese emperor like Joseon Kingdom (1392-1897).

The difference between “Huangdi” and “Tianzi” is acknowledged by Japanese scholars. For instance, Watanabe Shin’ichirou accepted this theory in his new book. However, in his opinion, this difference is based on the different understandings of “Tian Xia”. He analyzed two different levels of it: “Tian Xia” as “Zhong Guo”(China) which formed by the same language and cultural circle; “Tian Xia” as a multiply political society which was consisted of “Zhong Guo” and other territories occupied by different ethnic groups. Therefore, Chinese state until 1912 is neither a modern nation-state, nor a normal empire like Roman or Islamic empire. It was a “Tian Xia-state”, a multiple community that witnessed interactions of two different levels: the one controlled by “Huangdi” through imperial institutions like central bureaucracy and provincial system which is described as “Zhong Guo”, the other one that ruled by “Tianzi” through ideological power in East Asian public sphere that is named as “Tian Xia”. Different with New Qing History scholars, in Watanabe’s opinion, although the two different levels of Chinese state conflicted with and transformed by each other, the tendency of their interactions is the return to a single political society. (Watanabe, 2008: 70, 128). In other words, Chinese nation formation is a progress in which two major “state ideas” or “nation ideas” conflict against and shaped each other, finally unified in a larger cultural community which is named as “China” in early twentieth century.

In fact, Watanabe is not the first one who believe the existence of a “Tian Xia-state” which is different with all other nations. Mengce Luo(1906-1991), a famous Chinese educator, written in 1943, also believed China is a “Tian Xia-state”. In his understanding, that means a shared national sovereignty with different ethnic groups in “Tian Xia”, different with “nation-state” which is governed by a single ethnic itself and “imperial-state” which ruled other ethnic groups by a single ethnic. Therefore, “Tian Xia-state” is a community beyond the former and fight against the later. (Luo, 2019: 7). However, why Mengce Luo had to assert the distinctiveness of Chinese nation?

Since the “Tian Xia-state” is a cultural community which existed both “in the mind” and in reality, Chinese culture represented not only by Confucianism, but also by Buddhism and Taoism became a pivot that tightened Chinese people together. Chinese tradition of culturalism make Chinese people considered “culture”, not the nation, state or ethnic as an object of loyalty. (Yao, 2007: 262). Therefore, different with European understandings of human society which is fundamentally divided by political unit that is defined as “nation” or “state” and supported by a systematic modernity, Chinese “nation” is a community that has its own criteria for organizing political practices. However, the invasion of imperialism in the late of nineteenth century interrupted the natural development of Chinese state/nation formation. In the face of the destructive influences came from the western international system both to the Chinese institutions and state ideas, intellectuals of Qing dynasty started to reconsider the relationship between “Tian Xia” and “China”. As Chinese scholar Zhitian Luo argued that, the fundamental question behind “what is China” is: how to keep the Chinese subjectivity under the influence of modern nation-state theory and nationalism, shall we build China as a modern state, or keep the nature of “Tian Xia-state” which is a multiply cultural community(Luo, 2018). Therefore, intellectuals in the Chinese public sphere before 1949 respectively joined the two different camps around the question of “what is China” after the collapse of Chinese “Tian Xia-state”.

In fact, the collapse of “Tian Xia” is not only represented by the debate around “what is Zhong Guo” in China, but also by the refuse of “Zhong Hua” in the neighbors of China like Korea and Japan. As the synonym of “Zhong Guo”, “Zhong Hua” is a more cultural idea that provide regime legitimacy for a broader community of East Asian world. Unlike “Zhong Guo” which is a comparatively limited space, “Zhong Hua” is a totally ideological identity which represented by a series of cultural paradigm that shared by East Asian world since the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD).

As a symbol of civilization, “Zhong Hua” refer to the unified Chinese cultural community represented by a mutual system of language, political idea and moral principle, it is the center of the world in many east Asian’s imagination during that time, the only criteria to justify the legitimacy of a regime in China whose ruler claimed he is the “son of heaven” or “governor of Tianxia”. As a cultural identity acknowledged by ancient East Asian world, Korea and Japan which is considered as the sub-community both by China and themselves under “Tianxia” developed their own state idea that was called “Micro Zhonghua”. Therefore, in ancient East Asian world, China, Japan, Korea, and other ethnic groups consisted a larger “Tianxia-community” in which Chinese “Tianxia-state” is the center, Japan, Korea is the sub-center of this loosely cultural union.

However, “Smaller Zhonghua” is not a simple imitation of Chinese political idea and practice by Japan and Korea in their

nation formation. Although it was a single circle which around Chinese dynasties at the first beginning, it finally created a comparatively independent political system developed by different communities, became the origin of modern East Asian nations. For instance, in the seventeenth century, Japanese not considered them as a sub-center in a “Tianxia-community”, established a smaller “Tianxia-state” in which Japan is the center of Asian world. For Japanese, China is not “Zhonghua” anymore, but the frontier of Japan. After the Meiji Reformation in the late of nineteenth century, Japanese introduced the modernity marked by industrial civilization including modern nationalism and institutions into Japan, started the expansion of modern empire, destroyed the whole basis of “Tianxia-community” in East Asian world from inside. (Han, 2008: 52).

Accordingly, from ancient Chinese perspective, the collapse of the nation happened both in the central part marked by the decline of Chinese “Tianxia-state” and the periphery represented by the refuse of a “Tianxia-community” in East Asian world after the late of nineteenth century. However, if we look it from modern Chinese perspective, such collapse is a symbol marked the complete of Chinese nation formation that have two overlapped paths: the expansion of “Zhongguo” which was limited in Central Plain at the first beginning to the modern Chinese territory, the shrink of “Tianxia” that is a cultural community with comparatively unlimited extension to modern China. The interaction between “Zhongguo” and “Tianxia” in modern Chinese nation formation is connected by “Zhonghua” idea which achieved the expansion of former along with the cultural spread from Central Plain to other area on the one hand, it’s variation to “Smaller Zhonghua” created a centrifugal force inside the “Tianxia-community”, finally destroyed the basis of East Asian cultural union after the invasion of modern nation-state idea and the born of different nationalisms in Japan and Korea. In other words, the combination of traditional “Zhonghua” idea including its original model and variations with modernity created the embryo of modern Chinese, Korean and Japanese nationalism.

5. Conclusion

Last year, an associated professor in China is reported by one of his student for his comments on scientific development in ancient China. In his discussion with students on social media, he believed that no scientific innovation in ancient China according to the definition of “science”.³ His comments provoked discontent of several students, criticized by them as a twisted understanding of Chinese civilization. The blinkered nationalism based on students’ understanding of Chinese history is criticized by most Chinese medias, but it provide an extreme point in Chinese nationalism.

If this is one side of Chinese nationalism which attempt to explain ancient China as the most civilized nation in the world, some scholars in Taiwan is turning to another side try to dismember Chinese history from a local perspective. For instance, Tu Cheng-Sheng, Minister of Education in Taiwan, provided a highly politicized conception of Taiwan history . Different with many historians in Taiwan, he believed that Taiwan is the center of Chinese history which is around by several different levels. In his opinion, Taiwan is the most important and centered part which formed the first circle, the second circle is southeastern China, Philippine and other islands including RyuKyu; the third one is Japan, Korea and eastern part of China. Therefore, he not only disassembled the whole China, but also the whole northeastern Asia, believed that Taiwan was the center of the whole Asia (Ge, 2018: 14-15). His purpose claimed by himself is “look at our history on a basis that Taiwan is a principal part and establish a historical perspective with diverse angles and concerns”, is a twisted imagination that ignored historical reality, and criticized by many Taiwan legislators as “sever the nation”. (Huang, 2004: 3). The question is, if we can politicize Taiwan’s history as a way for some special desires, can we politicize Hawaii’s history, or North Ireland’s history for the same political demands?

In fact, as two extreme sides of Chinese nationalism, students who consider ancient China as the most civilized nation in the world and historians like Tu Cheng-Sheng all lived in the shadow of ancient “Tian-xia community”—an idea that consider themselves as the center of the world. For many Chinese, how to keep balance between Chinese cultural supremacy and historical nihilism is a challenge.

When China is attempting to overcome challenges comes from the conflicts between tradition and modernity, the United States is trying to deal with the conflicts between a universal democratic value and a locally American exceptionalism.

Since the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in English world, the rise of popular democracy and modern nation-states is connected tightly. Although Habermas believed that democratization leading to the decline of public sphere by limiting reasonable thinking in early modern era, scholars in different fields believed that his theory is impractical by ignoring modern politics (Clemens, 2010: 375; Benson, 2009: 179). More importantly, his explanation of public sphere in early modern era overemphasized Britain experience, criticized by American historians as a twisted imagination.

³ “University teacher punished for ‘incorrect’ remarks on ancient China’s scientific development”, *Global Times*, 21 August, 2019. At: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162226.shtml>.

Therefore, during the last thirty-years, historians focus on the formation of public sphere and the rise of American nationalism in the Early Republic, trying to provide a connection between popular democracy and American national character. For instance, David Waldstreicher believed that American nationalism which was born in early American public sphere, “has been a set of practices that empowered Americans to fight over the legacy of their national Revolution and to protest their exclusion from that Revolution’s fruits.” (Waldstreicher, 1997: 209). Waldstreicher’s interpretation ignored many dark sides of American democracy including slavery, the tragedy of Indians, and the dictatorship in the local church by different denominations, opened a Pandora’s box in Early American historiography. Under this interpretation, some historians considered American nationalism and popular politics as a same thing, became “preacher in trumpeting the American dream” (Hatter, 2013). The national teleology in historiography of Early American Republic demonstrated that, it is hard for scholars who are interested in the history of nationalism to escape from nationalism that they hold. Just as Joyce Appleby argued that, “National identity is also implicated in historical scholarship, for what we think we are as a nation is intimately linked with how we understand what we have done and believed as a people.” (Appleby, 1993: 266)

The historiography that linked nationalism with American democracy in last thirty years provide an image of paradox. On the one hand, scholars demonstrated the universality of modern democracy including democratic practices and its moral value. On the other hand, some historians tried to describe early American republic as a democratic utopia, ignored negative dimensions that against their stress on the greatness of founding era. Romanticism in historical narrative leading to a blind emphasis on illusory beliefs rather than the reasonable reality, provide a view which limited in Atlantic world, making a cosmopolitan ideal of democracy turning to a political rhetoric that emphasize American model. Therefore, fifteen years ago, when President Bush claimed that America should help failed states to establish democratic institutions in order to “make us safe”, (Bush, 2005), and Carlos Pascual, Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization argued that “it is impossible to draw neat, clear lines between our security interests, our development efforts and our democratic ideals”, (Pascual and Erel, 2005), a universal “democracy” is turning to a nationalism marked by the conflicts between a cosmopolitan ideal of human peace and national pursuit of prosperity.

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