

Transition psychology: the membership approach¹

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改革开放以来的中国社会转型给中国社会心理学者提供了独特的社会实验室。为了描述、理解和解释社会转型中的中国人心理和行为逻辑，应该呼唤直面社会转型的社会心理学研究，或转型心理学的研究，以超越文化特异性路径和稳态社会路径。其可能的核心构念是多元群体（成员）资格。

关键词：转型心理学 文化特异性路径 稳态社会路径 部分群体资格

China's social transformation since reform and opening up in 1978 has provided a unique social laboratory for Chinese researchers of social psychology. In order to describe, understand and interpret the psychological and behavioral logic of the Chinese people, we need to call on social psychology research or social transition psychology research that looks directly at social transition, in order to go beyond the cultural exceptionalism and static society approaches. Multiple group membership is the potential core construct of such a psychology.

Keywords: transition psychology, cultural exceptionalism approach, static society approach, partial group membership

I. Social transformation in China since the launching of reform and opening up: challenges and opportunities for social psychology

Earth-shattering changes or transformations have taken place in Chinese society in the thirty years since reform and opening up were launched in 1978. These have occurred at

1 This paper is a part of the research findings of the 2006 project, "Studies on the Group Membership of Social Actors: The Practice and Theory of a Transitional Society" under the Ministry of Education's Humanities and Social Sciences Key Research Bases (Project approval number: 06JJD840001) and the 2008 project of the State Social Sciences Fund, "Social Transformation in China: The Transitional Psychology Approach" (Project approval number: 08BSH063). Both projects are led by the author.

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the point where “the first great transformation”² and “the second great transformation”³ meet.⁴ To put it another way, social transformation in China embodies in a concentrated way almost all the important changes in human history; it goes beyond ordinary social change and signifies a shift in the development of civilization.⁵

Social transformation in China poses serious challenges to social psychologists and at the same time offers them valuable opportunities. It involves not only the reform of the political, economic and legal systems and profound changes in social structure, social stratification and social mobility, but also the relative weakening and strengthening of different social forces. The constantly emerging new social forces now oppose, now cooperate with the old forces. But all of them try to leave their imprint on the daily life and life quests of the Chinese people and compete for a positive intellectual evaluation, emotional experience and promise of action. Amidst this process, there have been observable and profound changes in the context of social action, sources of identity construction and action logic of the Chinese people.

How can we systematically depict, understand and interpret the logic and mechanisms of Chinese psychology and actions in the midst of social transformation? How do we bring the realities of social transformation into our social psychology research in order to forge a unique Chinese social psychology? How do we cultivate in Chinese social psychologists a deep concern for and sensitivity to lasting human dilemmas and urgent topical issues? All these questions pose challenges that Chinese social psychology has to face squarely; they also offer it opportunities for the revival of reason.

This paper aims to offer a few simple introductory remarks in the hope that others may raise discussion to a higher level. It begins with a brief review of the basic achievements of Chinese social psychology since the initiation of reform and opening up and attempts to summarize the dominant theoretical perspectives, the cultural exceptionalism approach and the static society approach. It then demonstrates an approach that captures and grasps the transitional psychology of social transformation, an approach with group membership as its key construct. A discussion of some urgent questions of transitional psychology follows. The paper ends with some brief conclusions.

II. Chinese social psychology since the initiation of reform and opening up: a brief review

Chinese social psychology has had its own important theories and accumulated

2 C. Polanyi, *The great transformation: the political and economic origins of our time*.

3 M. Burawoy, “A sociology for the second great transformation?” pp. 693-695.

4 Shen Yuan, *Market, classes and society: key topics of transitional sociology*, p. 170.

5 Sun Liping: “Social transformation: a new topic in developmental sociology.”

experience since reform and opening up in 1978.⁶ Its dominant theoretical perspectives may be summarized as the cultural exceptionalism approach and the static society approach.

1. The cultural exceptionalism approach

Beginning in the 1960s, the cultural exceptionalism approach was primarily an international academic movement with far-reaching significance. Its basic thrust was to determine the cultural embeddedness of social mind and social behavior. It has since engendered a massive academic industry of cross-cultural studies.

Through the research and dissemination efforts of sociologists and behavioralists in Chinese Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1970s, the cultural exceptionalism approach gained a certain influence among mainland social scientists, including social psychologists. Another name for this approach is the Chinese cultural exceptionalism orientation. Within this framework, Chinese social psychology has already produced relevant results, such as Chinese model of social ties / face / personal relations and Chinese cognitive style and self-concept.

However, the intellectual stimulus contained in this approach has been gradually wearing out. Systematic examination and questioning are being refined, and the replacement project is well on the way to maturity.

This examination and questioning involve meta-theory as well as the collection and interpretation of empirical data. In brief, the meta-theoretical premises of the cultural exceptionalism approach consist mainly of cultural essentialism and cultural-behavioral causal determinism.

In the view of proponents of cultural exceptionalism, different cultural communities seem to have within them fixed and homogeneous cultural entities. In the Chinese cultural context, the main representative of such entities is supposed to be the Confucian tradition, a tradition held to have molded Chinese psychological and behavioral patterns from ancient times up to the present day. We may accept for the moment this fatalistic cultural outlook and Han-centric chauvinism, but can the Chinese cultural context really be simplified into “the Confucian tradition” post-1978, or even as far back as the May Fourth Movement of 1919? Marxist spirit and ethics have played a primary role in both ideology and daily life. If we draw a rough sketch-map of contemporary Chinese culture, we will see that Marxism occupies a dominant position and the ethics of the market economy play a role at least as important as of the repeatedly restructured traditional culture (which is by no means limited to the Confucian tradition!)

Cultural substantialism is also closely connected with cultural-behavioral causal

6 Le Guoan, *Research progress of Chinese social psychology*.

determinism. Its logic is concise and hews closely to intuition: different cultural communities have different cultural patterns, which in turn determine individual and group psychological and behavioral patterns within their own contexts. These result in the differences in individual and group psychology and behavior in different cultural models that are found in cross-cultural studies. This is in fact a cultural attribution fallacy.⁷

The collection and interpretation of empirical data in a cross-cultural framework also warrant rigorous and detailed examination.

First, the operationalization of cultural variables. In cross-cultural studies the independent variable refers, first of all, to the state; here the state variable is inappropriately treated as a cultural variable. In other words, in cross-cultural studies substantial non-cultural variables infiltrate and become confounding variables. Examples are the ecology variable, the population variable and the individual characteristics variable.⁸

Second, inter-cultural and intra-cultural differences and cultural consistency. A host of cross-cultural materials indicate that the inter-cultural differences in social mentality and social behavior are smaller than the intra-cultural differences; there may even be no inter-cultural differences but great intra-cultural differences. Cultural variables are subject to over-interpretation, random naming and labeling.

Third, cultural dimensions. The most influential cultural dimension is individualism-collectivism. In their meta-analysis of all relevant papers published from 1980 to 1999, Oyserman et al.⁹ discovered that insofar as so-called American culture is concerned, Americans of European descent are no more individualistic than African Americans and no less collectively minded than the Americans of Japanese or Korean origin. "Individualism-collectivism" does not offer a precise description of the cultural differences between the West and China.

Fourth, causation. Even if there is a connection between culture and behavior, it is not easy to say whether culture gives rise to behavior or vice versa.¹⁰

Meanwhile, alternative theoretical models and empirical projects to replace the cultural exceptionalism approach are being perfected.

First is the American social theorist Ann Swidler's tool-kit model. Her basic proposition is culture in action. The individual who is a dynamic actor is not a puppet of the cultural system. The cultural repertoires actors acquire in the process of enculturation

7 D. Matsumoto, and S. H. Yoo, "Toward a new generation of cross-cultural research," pp. 234-250.

8 D. Matsumoto, and S. H. Yoo, "Toward a new generation of cross-cultural research," pp. 234-250.

9 D. Oyserman, et al., "Rethinking individualism and collectivism: evaluation of theoretical assumptions and meta-analyses," pp. 3-72.

10 D. Matsumoto, and S. H. Yoo, "Toward a new generation of cross-cultural research," pp. 234-250.

are merely the symbolic resources or tool-kits they can employ in their actions.¹¹ Actors strategically choose and balance the relevant symbolic resources and construct and reconstruct these resources in their actions. Therefore, there are no fixed cultural entities, nor any crude causal determinism.

Then there is the epidemiological model of cultural representation of Dan Sperber, a French cognitive anthropologist. For Sperber, a specific culture has its material cultural representations, which are ceaselessly produced, disseminated and reproduced within that cultural community and among different cultural communities. The process of enculturation is in fact a process of dissemination of cultural representation or a process of infection by cultural “viruses.” Even when people live in the same cultural community, the spread of cultural representation has different effects on the person of different individuals, in the same way as bacterial infections. When an infectious disease spreads some people are heavily infected or even die, whereas others are lightly infected and yet others completely immune to it. Similarly, in the same cultural community, the process of enculturation of different members is simply a process of the epidemiology of cultural representations in different distribution situations.¹² The result is that the same system has qualitatively different “degrees of infection” for different members.

The above theoretical models are based on theoretical debates. In the context of social psychology, a new model of cultural-social behavior has been constructed against the background of the mental context of cultural cognition and knowledge activation and on the basis of cultural priming of the classic experimental procedures. This was the dynamic constructivism of culture model developed by the couple Chi-yue Chiu and Y.-Y. Hong. Due to different opportunities, such as immigration and transnational working experience, some people live and work in a bicultural or even multicultural context and therefore have a bicultural or multicultural mind.¹³ Against the contemporary background of globalization, anyone may have a bicultural or multicultural mind because no one lives in a single homogeneous (sub-)cultural context. For actors endowed with a multicultural mind, psychology and behavior in a given context is transformed into the question of how their “domain-specific” cultural knowledge is primed and activated. They creatively construct their cultural priming procedures with cultural symbols / icons as the primes. The researchers discovered that the significance of culture for social behavior follows the principles of knowledge activation and the switch of cultural frameworks based on cultural priming.¹⁴

11 A. Swidler, “Culture in action: symbols and strategies,” pp. 273-286.

12 D. Sperber, *Explaining culture: a naturalistic approach*.

13 C.-Y. Chiu and Y.-Y. Hong, *Social psychology of culture*, pp. 281-307; Y.-Y. Hong, et al., “Multicultural minds: a dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition,” pp. 709-720.

14 E. T. Higgins, “Knowledge activation: accessibility, applicability and salience,” pp. 133-168.

2. The static society approach

The static society approach does not have any systematic body of theory but is contained in a number of empirical studies. The common features of these studies are expressed in their problem consciousness, methodological preferences, data-collection procedures, and other links.

Their problem consciousness derives mainly from their studious pursuit, imitation and reproduction of mainstream Western academic circles, especially North American social psychology researchers, and is often accompanied by the urge to compare Chinese and Western cultures. In the positive sense, this problem consciousness is a constant assistance to our young researchers' study and understanding of mainstream academic progress; in the negative sense, it reduces the spiritual character of Chinese social psychology to that of a straggling follower of North American research fashions. North American society is already a highly static procedural society and the growth points in its scholars' problem consciousness tend to be side issues in a static society, whereas the society in which Chinese proponents of the static society live is a transitional society. There are qualitative differences between a static and a transitional society with respect to forms of expression, causes and results of social psychology phenomena and corresponding strategies.

A methodological preference for the static society approach may be attributed to individualism in a vacuum. In the course of the research process, living actors are artificially deprived of their variegated features and simplified into highly homogeneous atomistic individuals. Thus social psychology, which should be geared to social concerns, degenerates into "asocial" social psychology or individualistic psychology.¹⁵

Their data-collection procedures, as Tajfel's criticism puts it, are nothing but experiments or questionnaires in a vacuum.¹⁶ Massive social realities are distorted or simplified into sham interactions among unrelated individuals in a laboratory or in the field.

III. The key construct of transitional psychology: group membership

1. The distinctive feature of man's social being: multiple group membership

A "group" is a collection of two or more individuals who believe they are members of the same social category. With regard to this group and its group membership they have a certain degree of social consensus, i.e., recognition from at least one other member.¹⁷ So group identification and the acquisition of group membership are the result of interaction between in-group self-definition and out-group social definition. At the macro-level,

15 Fang Wen, "Discipline system elites, symbolic hegemony and social forgetting."

16 H. Tajfel, "Experiments in vacuum," pp. 69-122.

17 H. Tajfel, and J. C. Turner, "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior," p. 15.

the latter involves placing the individual within the bounds of the system of social categorization and, at the micro-level, the process of social categorization of the others on the spot. However, both the system of social categorization and others on the spot involve giving objective content to the subjective meaning of self-definition.

All individuals, from the moment of birth, are dynamic actors or “motivated tacticians.”¹⁸ Throughout their lives, they carry on a ceaseless fight against and game with the multiple forces of the social context. All these social forces try to imprint themselves on individuals and make them in their own image, while individuals try, over the course of their lives, to let each of these forces play its own role and find its own place, so that they become resources for constructing each individual’s own unique and dynamic whole person. Human beings then assume a completely new historical form in relation to fate: the imprint of multiple social forces on the construction of the actor’s dynamic whole person.

In concrete terms, this process of construction means that all human beings take an active part in and construct their own unique group life during the course of their lives. Based on a given system of social categorization, all individuals are endowed at the birth with a meta-group set of features and live in specific cultural, political and even religious communities, while at the same time they acquire group membership of these communities. On this foundation, they also seek to pursue other dynamic and multiple group memberships over the course of their lives, like educational level, type of occupation and consumption tastes. The meaning of growing up and of social existence is a process of acquiring and enriching multiple group memberships.

The process of acquiring multiple memberships is also the process through which individuals as activists take part in social life, acquire and construct group knowledge and collective memory, and pursue their life-long efforts at identification. In other words, the characteristic feature of human social existence is this lifelong process of pursuing multiple group memberships and constructing the unique whole person. In this sense, each person has a unique world.

2. The social psychology implications of China’s social transformation

China’s social transformation has shaped and is still shaping the historical destiny of the Chinese people. There are no social transformations that are not borne by somebody, and no Chinese is completely immune from social transformation in China. In molding different social forces, social transformation in China inevitably stamps its unique brand on every Chinese.

This brand is by no means random and accidental, nor is it exceptional. It is inevitably

18 Fang Wen, “How do group symbolic boundaries take shape?”

stamped on individuals with a shared historical destiny or shared cognition / experiences / intentions, changing the generative channels and spaces of multiple group memberships along with the forms and weightings of their combination. With multiple group membership as the core, we will be able to provide an accurate depiction of the main phenomena and processes of social psychology set in motion by China's social transformation.

The process of individual acquisition of group membership and identification / de-identification / re-identification contains basic and widespread social psychological processes. Social identity theorists have revealed the operating logic of these basic processes of social categorization, social comparison, and identification and de-identification / re-identification.¹⁹ Social transformation in China has permeated all of these basic processes.

Although changes in the system of social categorization since reform and opening up have not yet been systematically studied, some basic facts have emerged. Social transformation in China has had a significant influence on all aspects of the categorization process. Firstly, the system of social categorization encountered by every Chinese from birth onward has undergone profound changes. The pre-1978 criteria based on political status, household registration and administrative records has changed to the multiple criteria of the post-reform period. Secondly, some parts of the system are undergoing changes, such as household register categorization based on place of birth. Thirdly, new categorization criteria and clues are continuously being produced, and channels and spaces for acquiring group membership are steadily expanding.

Social transformation in China has also changed and is still changing the comparison criteria and reference standards of group membership. First, the status evaluation criterion in the system of social categorization is undergoing radical changes. Second, its comparison criteria and reference standards are moving towards pluralism. Third, there is a steady increase among certain groups of a sense of relative deprivation arising from social comparison, and their dissatisfaction is growing.

The space for free mobility created by social transformation has increased and enriched Chinese identification resources and steadily expanded space and channels for free choice. Modes, opportunities and strategies for de-identification / re-identification are also in continuous change.

In short, social transformation shapes and leaves its imprints on all basic social psychological processes related to group membership.

There seem to be other competing constructs for accurately depicting the main social

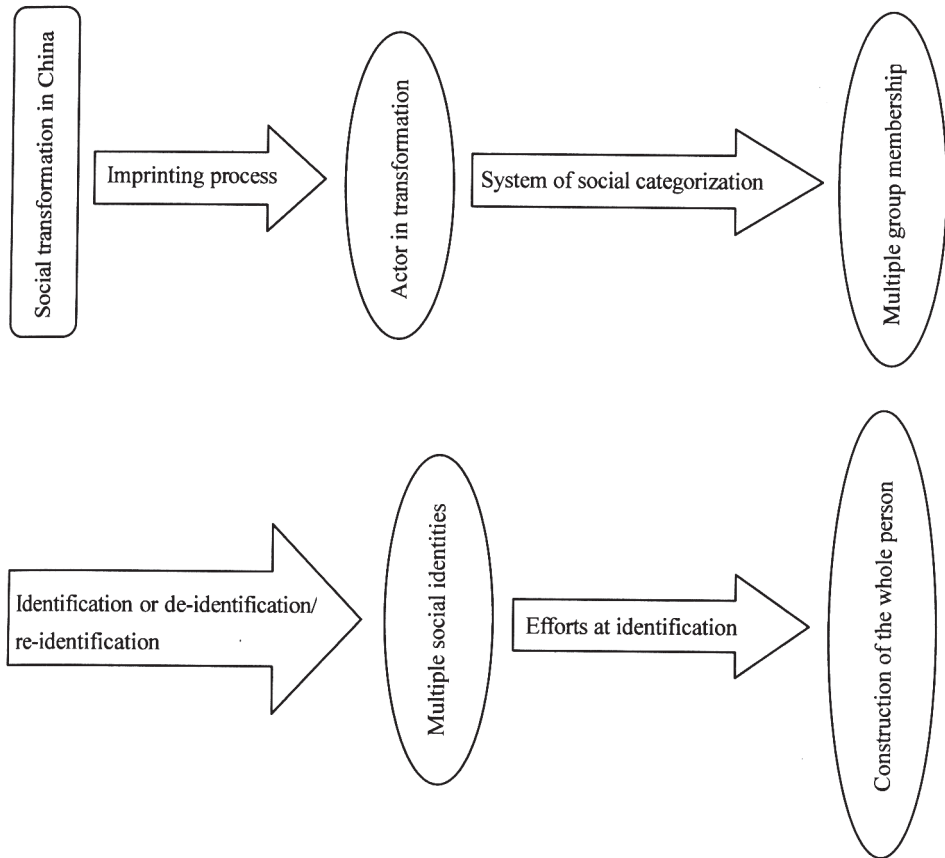
19 M. Hogg and D. Abrams, *Social identifications*; H. Tajfel and J. C. Turner, "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior."

psychological phenomena and processes touched off by social transformation in China, such as the continuous emergence of new social roles and new social identities, but group membership offers interpretive advantages compared to social role or social identity.²⁰

3. *The basic logic of transition psychology*

The basic logic of transition psychology may be summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The basic logic of transition psychology



Social transformation in China has changed and is still changing the social context in which the Chinese people live and various basic social forces, leaving its mark on every actor. The imprinting process of social transformation is just like tattooing. First, social transformation will inevitably stamp a unique brand on every Chinese; with the aid of unique and sensitive research schema, we can discern the forms of these imprints and their later development. Second, this imprinting process is not a unilateral process forcing social transformation on

20 Fang Wen, "Group membership: a new approach to social identity events."

individuals, but a process of interaction between the tattooer and the tattooed. Third, the imprinting process is not accomplished at one go, but involves the creation of social art.

The imprinting process of social transformation has stepwise results; that is, actors join different groups on the basis of the system of social categorization and thereby acquire membership of these groups. But the acquisition of group membership is not based on an “all-or-nothing” logic; it has a stepped character, moving from no group membership through partial / quasi-membership to full membership, just like the progression from Party activist to alternate Party member and then full Party member. The stepped character of group membership may be unrelated to meta-membership or ascribed membership of the group, for the acquisition of ascribed membership follows the “all-or-nothing” logic, but the acquisition of non-ascribed membership is, almost without exception, stepped in nature. This feature exists not only in the multiple group memberships of an individual, but also in the memberships of a legal person or organization, as, for example, the progression from non-member to observer/alternate member and then full member of an international organization. Although research on partial membership has just begun, unique secrets of social operation may be discernible in its establishment and acquisition.²¹

The acquisition of any group membership is accompanied by identification and de-identification / re-identification. The qualitative difference between group membership and social identity is confused or overlooked in almost all perspectives on social identity and the two are mistakenly taken as involving the same social psychological phenomenon. Social identity refers to actors’ active cognitive appraisal / emotional experience and action promise in relation to a specific attribute, e.g., their own group membership. Group membership comes before a *possible* identity, but the two do not necessarily correspond. Actors do not necessarily have a sense of identity with their group membership; in other words, group membership and identity are not necessarily consistent. This inconsistency may lead them to give up or change their group membership and seek a new group membership. The process of doing so is the process of social mobility and change. Through identification and de-identification / re-identification, individuals cultivate and construct dynamic multiple social identities.

All the above processes are rooted in actors’ lifelong identity work and their attempts to construct a dynamic and identical whole person in the course of social transformation. Here we may cite Fei Xiaotong’s ingenious construct “pluralistic unity”: in social transformation, all individuals as dynamic actors construct, through their lifelong identity

21 Fang Wen, “Group membership: a new approach to social identity events”; Liu Shuang, “Studies on the process of joining the Party for students of higher learning institutions.”

work, their unique whole person in a “pluralistic unity.” “Pluralistic” here refers to each actor’s multiple group memberships, which take the human body (and its extensions) as concrete symbols to achieve a unique whole person.

IV. Urgent topics for discussion in transition psychology

1. Multiple group memberships and their weighting: the question of measurement

For group membership to become the key construct of transition psychology, the hardest and most fundamental task before us is the construction of a measurement method, as this is the foundation of quantifying research on groups. The design of such an instrument must meet the following basic requirements.

First, it must be concise, effective and reliable. It must be able to faithfully measure an individual’s multiple group memberships and nothing extraneous, and the results of repeated measurements must have a high degree of consistency.

Second, measurement results must be able to reflect the classification, order of priority and weighting rank of multiple group memberships. In other words, such measurement must be able to reflect the different weightings of individuals’ multiple group memberships, that is, the difference in group memberships in relation to the perception of group entitativity.²²

Third, it must be able to concern itself with the changing pathways of multiple group memberships in social transformation. The composition, modes of combination and relative weighting of actors’ multiple group memberships change constantly over a lifetime and measurement results should be able to explain their changing path.

Fourth, it must be able to provide a method of measuring synchronous and diachronous comparisons of civil society, as the degree of development and maturity of a civil society is closely related to an individual’s acquired group memberships.

Pilot study has begun on the measurement of group membership and has produced some preliminary results.

2. Mapping groups in transitional China

China’s social structure in the course of social transformation has been systematically mapped,²³ but not enough attention has been given to the social psychological processes of the people concerned. In order to systematically describe their knowledge, feelings and actions, our studies must go from the structural level deep into the psychological level. The aim of mapping groups is to delineate the structural characteristics, cognitive style,

22 V. Yzerbyt, *et al.*, *The psychology of group perception*.

23 V. Yzerbyt, *et al.*, *The psychology of group perception*.

emotional models, habitual behavioral models and life expectations of different groups in transformational society.

Social transformation has produced many new groups, like new-generation migrants, left-behind children and spouses, new workers, laid-off workers, religious groups, groups with common interests and new social strata. It has also redefined the life paths of established groups, such as political party members, civil servants and military personnel. All these groups await systematic study.

Amendments to and changes in physical maps show changes in social ecology and the mapping of groups should similarly be able to show the pathways of group change. Therefore, a fundamental task of such research must be attention to different groups and the collection of relevant trace data.

3. Nation-building: difficult issues in relation to citizen identity and world citizen consciousness

China's social transition and peaceful development have extended the stage and space for activity for the Chinese. Internationally, they have been accompanied by major readjustments to geopolitical patterns and interest relations. Domestically, division and even conflict in social cognition and interests among different regions, ethnic groups, social strata and household registration groups are steadily intensifying. All these pose challenges to nation-building.

The goal of nation-building during social transformation in China is to firmly establish the Constitution as a common and independent political grammar, and cultivate and strengthen the sentiment of "constitutional patriotism" described by Habermas,²⁴ in order to transcend and integrate the differences among the multiple cultural communities of different regions, ethnic groups, religions and languages. To put it another way, in a structure where all the citizens of the Republic have multiple group memberships and social identities, group membership in the political community and citizen and national identities should take priority in order to transcend regional, ethnic, religious and language divergences and differences.

Real and serious challenges to nation-building come from the forces supporting independence for Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. This is not only a domestic but also an international problem: hostile international forces of various kinds want to undermine China and seek to take advantage of this opportunity to intervene. There are two social psychology implications of this phenomenon. The forces of division seek to use regional, ethnic and religious identity to override and even replace citizen and national identities, while international forces hostile to China try every means to smear and attack Chinese

24 F. I. Michelman, "Morality, identity and 'constitutional patriotism'," pp. 253-271.

identity confidence in their citizen and national identities.

In nurturing a Republican citizen identity, the question of how to develop relaxed and confident identity techniques and mobilize identity resources to forge and strengthen citizen and national identities and world citizen consciousness is an urgent and difficult one at both the theoretical and the practical level.

V. An unfinished conclusion: advancing towards transition psychology

At the macro-level, through constant construction or deconstruction / reconstruction of the system of social categorization, social transformation in China is changing the significance and evaluation of Chinese ascribed group membership (such as sex, ethnicity or place of birth), or opening up space for channels and opportunities of acquiring achieved group membership (such as education, consumption and citizen participation), or institutionally calibrating and producing new types of group membership (such as constantly emerging new occupational memberships and stigmas). At the micro-level, actors' abandonment of old group memberships and acquisition of new ones constitute the process of social mobility and social change.

Looking squarely at social transformation in China, we are full of hope and confidence: Chinese social psychology is on the road to rational revival.

Notes on contributor

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