

Chineseness Discourse: A Review

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SUMMARY

Chineseness is both an old and a new term to signify the identity of “being Chinese”. Although the term has been used for long time, it is until two decades ago that the term started to become popular. Chineseness characterizes what are seen as fundamental Chinese cultural attributes and core values under one common umbrella of “China” and one common label of “Chinese”, which transcend beyond the scales of time and space in history. It is an invention which creates a uniform “China” and “Chinese” despite changing situations, globally, regionally and nationally. It reflects the momentum of the new international relations in general and of the new China in particular, in contrast to old and conventional terms that cannot adequately articulate the meaning and implication under these new situations. The case of Chineseness offers us the chance to explore the tension between essentialist and constructivist views of identity.

At critical and historic junctures, both of China’s own development and of the world situation, Chineseness discourse always aims to answer the same simple, yet fundamental and essential questions: What is China, who are Chinese? How and why China should move forward? And what does being Chinese mean after such change? In a final analysis, Chineseness aims to conceptualize the making of China and Chinese as a body, as an identity, and as modernity.

To better understand Chineseness and Chineseness discourse, this paper attempts to address the issue as a whole as well as a process, as a subject as well as a context, as a myth as well as a reality.