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A GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE 'MULTIPLE RENAISSANCES'*

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ABSTRACT. *Many scholars claim that the world has had many 'renaissances' in its long history: they advocate what we could call the 'multiple renaissances' thesis. In this article, I will focus on the history of this idea. Where and when did the 'multiple renaissances' thesis emerge? What intellectual exchanges and historical conditions made it possible? To answer these questions, I will first draw up a short genealogy of the idea that the European/Italian Renaissance is a 'culture' or a 'social type'; then, I will show that such typological use of the renaissance made it possible to apply this concept to different historical and social configurations, not only within, but also outside Europe; finally, through an analysis of the relation between Arnold Toynbee and Hu Shi, I will show that the uses of the renaissance category in the non-European world, especially in East Asia, contributed to shaping the 'multiple renaissances' thesis and, through it, to redefining the perception of the renaissance in Europe proper.*

Scholars from different institutions and academic backgrounds, from Japan to the United States, from Germany to India, claim that Europe has long ceased to be the exclusive owner of the Renaissance. They claim that China, Bengal, and the Islamic world have had renaissances of their own, in some cases even before the European one. They say that these renaissances are not just 'renascences' or 'revivals' of ancient traditions, but renaissances in the same sense as in modern European historiography, and that they are characterized by some of the same basic features that gave rise to the modern West. This is how these scholars intend to challenge European exceptionalism. But when we take a closer look,

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we have the impression that their ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis has brought back through the door what it had thrown out through the window. By taking western Europe as their implicit model, particularly the Italian Renaissance, these scholars unconsciously hold that western Europe is the standard of every ‘modernity’; in so doing, they make us think that China, Bengal, or the Islamic world are worth studying purely because they may have followed a ‘quasi-European’ historical path. Such are the intrinsic contradictions of this thesis.

In this article, I do not propose a critical assessment of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis; I will neither praise the research possibilities it opened, nor attack its heuristic limitations. I will rather focus on the history of this idea. Where and when did the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis emerge? What intellectual exchanges and historical conditions made it possible and shaped it? To answer these questions, I will not attempt to find the ‘inventor’ of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis, but I will study the interconnections that contributed to its emergence. I will concentrate on one of its major proponents, Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), and will identify some of the European and non-European ‘renaissance bearers’ who, for their own purposes, suggested that the renaissance existed beyond early modern Europe. More specifically, I will show that Toynbee partly owed his ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis to Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962),¹ a well-known Chinese intellectual, and more generally to the uses of the concept of ‘renaissance’ in the non-European world.

As I will argue, Arnold Toynbee and Hu Shi contributed to a more general transformation of the ‘renaissance’ concept: by the first decades of the twentieth century, ‘renaissance’ had ceased to be just the name of a period, and had gradually become the ideal type of a human phenomenon. Indeed, before the nineteenth century, the Renaissance had been a purely operative historiographical concept; that is, it simply referred to a historical event or to its period, and not to a social or cultural type. But after going through a process of ‘typification’ during the nineteenth century, the ‘renaissance’ became the ideal type of a ‘cultural form’ and came to be applied to different societies all over the world. This process involved shared uses of ‘renaissance’ between the European and non-European world, and followed a general endeavour in human and social sciences to turn temporal concepts into ideal types for sociological or anthropological analysis. The ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis, as I will show, resulted from the transcontinental dimensions of this process.

In this sense, the history of the ‘multiple renaissances’ – at least the historical thread I follow in this article – is a sign of the fundamental interconnectedness between different groups from East and South Asia to America and western Europe. The ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis may or may not challenge European exceptionalism. Its history surely does.

¹ Following contemporary conventions within the field of Chinese history, I use the *pinyin* transcription of Hu Shi’s name throughout the article. Some quotations, following the Wade–Giles transcription, spell his name ‘Hu Shih’.

I

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jack Goody (1919–2015) was one of the most important advocates of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis. In his *Renaissance: the one or the many?* (2010), as in some chapters of *The theft of history* (2012), Goody set out to demonstrate that features of the European Renaissance have also characterized analogous processes in the Islamicate, Indian, and Chinese worlds. He was not alone in this endeavour. Since the 1990s, as a survey of book titles shows, there has been an increasing interest in the different ‘renaissances’ that took place outside Europe; this process has paralleled a slightly more successful scholarly enterprise, the ‘multiple modernities’ thesis, which the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt (1923–2010) formulated at the beginning of the twenty-first century.² These academic trends gave a boost to the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis, and Goody – whose status in the social sciences is at least equivalent to Eisenstadt’s – undoubtedly contributed to push it forward.

For Goody, the ‘renaissance’ was essentially a phenomenon of literate cultures. It was not an event that took place in western Europe, but rather a *sort* of event, not necessarily confined to a single time and place:

Beginning with the ‘first lights’ (*primi lumi*) of the fourteenth century, the Italian Renaissance has often been seen as the critical moment in the development of ‘modernity’ That this was certainly an important moment in history, even in world history, there can be no doubt. But how unique was it in a general way?

This rhetorical question on the uniqueness of the Italian Renaissance led him to distinguish between the ‘sociological’ and the ‘historical’:

There is a specific historical problem as well as a general sociological one. All societies in stasis require some kind of rebirth to get them moving again, and that may involve a looking back at a previous era (Antiquity in the European case) or it may involve another type of efflorescence.³

The opposition between the ‘historical’ and the ‘sociological’ had a particular role in Goody’s argument: it distinguished the *event* from the *type*. The *event* called ‘the Renaissance’ happened in a particular setting, and in this sense it conveys the singular features that the historical moment instilled into it. The *type* called ‘renaissance’ is something different. It is a set of characteristics

² Shmuel Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple modernities’, *Daedalus*, 129 (2000), pp. 1–29. The ‘many’ thesis is a reaction against what could be called ‘negative questions’ about the non-European world. Unlike Max Weber’s studies on the relation between religion and the origins of capitalism (‘why didn’t other places in the world produce capitalism?’) or the famous ‘Needham question’ (‘why did modern science emerge only in the West and not in China?’), which are based on the negative assumption that the rest of the world ‘does not have X’ (or has not produced X on its own terms), the different ‘many X’ theses (many renaissances, modernities, enlightenments ...) have suggested that the non-European world ‘has X too’. For a general review and critical assessment of the ‘multiple renaissances’ approach, see Mark Gamsa, ‘Uses and misuses of a Chinese renaissance’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 10 (2013), pp. 635–54.

³ Jack Goody, *Renaissances: the one or the many?* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 7.

which do not have a time and space of their own and which, to a certain extent, transcend the historical event; it is a social type, a configuration of social behaviours that the analyst may find in the most unexpected places and times. This double dimension of the renaissance was particularly important for Goody's argumentation. If the renaissance was only attached to a singular event—for example, the *primi lumi*—and therefore to a single place and a single time, then it could never repeat itself: things never happen in the same way. As a sociological category, however, and more precisely as an ideal type, the renaissance ceases to be attached to a singular event: it is a sort of event, not the event itself; it analytically discards the singular and brings forward the general features that make the socio-historical phenomenon similar to others. This 'sociological' renaissance (or 'renascence', as Goody preferred to call it) served as the central pillar of his arguments about the 'multiple renaissances' in human history.

Such an idea, as Goody himself acknowledged, was not his own. He took it from different sources. One of them, a fundamental one, was the area specialists. Many historians of China, India, or the Islamic world claim to have found a 'renaissance' in their own areas of expertise; they have therefore used, before Goody, the category of 'renaissance' in the ideal typical way I have just described. But for Goody's world historical perspective, especially for his comparative approach, there was another key inspiration: Arnold Toynbee's *A study of history*, and especially his volume on the 'renaissances', published in 1954.⁴ Goody explained:

In his multivolumed *A Study of History*, Toynbee looked upon a renaissance as 'one particular instance of a recurrent phenomenon'. The essential feature of this genus was '[t]he evocation of a dead culture by the living representative of a civilization that is still a going concern'. Here we are not only concerned with the looking back but also with a burst forward, a flowering. Toynbee does indeed argue that there were such renaissances in other parts of the world, especially in China.

Goody was not completely satisfied with Toynbee's approach, but he still considered him a major predecessor in his endeavour to 'pluralize' the renaissances:

The idea of a burst forward remains implicit and he does not link the event to literacy nor yet to the secularization of knowledge. In this extraordinary work, however, he does offer a more comparative approach to the Renaissance but one which is also more fragmented in that he treats separately 'renaissances of political ideas, ideals and institutions', 'renaissances of systems of law', 'renaissances of philosophies', 'renaissances of language and literature' and 'renaissances of the visual arts'. My own study accepts the breadth of Toynbee's approach but tries to deal with the problem more holistically.⁵

So, beyond his critiques, Toynbee remained for Goody a major source of inspiration. Goody thereby acknowledged a historical debt: Toynbee was indeed a major proponent of the 'multiple renaissances' thesis.

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

From the 1920s, Toynbee was an important figure among European historians, especially in the field of world history; although he was often criticized, to a certain extent he shaped the scholarly agenda of the field, and he also had a very important role in British diplomacy and was constantly present in the media. Toynbee's theory of the 'multiple renaissances' was intended, as he explicitly claimed, to 'provincialize' the European/Italian renaissance. This resonance with Dipesh Chakrabarty's much later book *Provincializing Europe*, and more generally with postcolonial studies, should not be surprising: Toynbee was as suspicious of the centrality of 'the West' in world history as scholars of postcolonial studies have been in recent decades. In the ninth volume of *A study of history*, Toynbee denounced as 'provincial' the customary use of the word 'renaissance' to refer to a singular event in world history:

In ordinary Modern Western parlance the singular expression 'The Renaissance' was used to denote something that had happened in one local province of one civilization in one age of its history on two planes of its activity. The particular civilization in question was Western Christendom, the particular province was Northern and Central Italy, the particular age was the Late Medieval period of Western history (*circa* A.D. 1275–1475).⁶

In other words, the idea that 'the Renaissance' was exclusively a European phenomenon resulted from the provincial self-representation of 'Western civilization' as the epicentre of global civilization. Toynbee claimed that, if the Western historian were to take a look at universal history, he would find that this 'Western renaissance' was not at all unique. He explained with an astronomical analogy:

when a 'twentieth-century' *terricola* was reminded, by the spectacle of 'the Milky Way', that suns were as common as dirt, and when he went on to reflect that any of these innumerable suns might have numerous planets revolving round it, he was forced to realize that his habitual phrase 'the Planets' was as provincial an expression as 'the Moon', and 'the Sun' as crass a provincialism as 'the Earth'.⁷

Toynbee therefore proposed changing the focus, and gave a broader definition of what a 'renaissance' is:

As soon as we have thus brought all the relevant phenomena into view, we become aware that, in using the word *renaissance* as a proper name, we have been allowing ourselves to fall into the error of seeing a unique occurrence in an event which in reality was no more than one particular instance of a recurrent historical phenomenon. The evocation of a dead culture by the living representatives of a civilization that is still a going concern proves to be a species of historical event for which the proper label is, not 'the Renaissance', but 'renaissances'.⁸

⁶ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. IX (London, New York, NY, and Toronto, 1954), p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

In other words, ‘renaissances’ take place every time the ‘living representatives’ of a civilization evoke a ‘dead culture’ of their past. When Westerners are only acquainted with their own renaissance, they call that event ‘the’ renaissance, as if it did not exist anywhere else than in the history of their own province. However, when they discover that ‘renaissances’ are ‘as common as dirt’ in human history, they have the same feeling as Toynbee’s *terricola* who discovers the Milky Way: the sun he sees every day is not ‘his’ sun, but just one instance of what is actually a ‘universal’ phenomenon. Here we see how Toynbee’s concept of the renaissance as a ‘species of event’ could prefigure Goody’s ‘sociological’ renaissance: it was intended as a non-Eurocentric concept of a trans-historical phenomenon, and more generally as a tool of historical anthropology.

II

How did this idea come to Toynbee’s mind? At least two intellectual threads seem to converge in his particular concept of what a ‘renaissance’ was. The first thread goes back to Jules Michelet’s (1798–1874) and Jacob Burckhardt’s (1818–97) ground-breaking definitions of the renaissance in *Renaissance* (1855) and *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) respectively, and, perhaps, to Walter Pater’s (1839–94) *The Renaissance* (1873). The three books shared the same idea: the renaissance was a ‘culture’ or a type of society which could be defined. Before them, in early nineteenth-century European literature and history, the ‘Renaissance’ had roughly referred to the ‘re-birth of arts and sciences’ and to the ‘revival of antiquity’ in Italy between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries; later on, it became the name of the period which conveyed those historical phenomena. Michelet, Burckhardt, and Pater turned this period into a substance: especially in the case of Burckhardt, the renaissance was the concept of a well-defined ‘culture’.⁹ This ‘culture’ could be described in terms of the typified patterns of a whole society; ‘its outer entire form’ (*ihre äusserliche Gesamtform*) – as Burckhardt claimed in his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* – ‘is society in its broadest sense’.¹⁰

Once Burckhardt defined this ‘renaissance culture’, it was possible to detach it from the actual place where it supposedly emerged. If the typical features of the Renaissance could be found somewhere else, why not claim that there were other ‘renaissances’? Since at least the 1920s, many European historians have questioned the uniqueness of the Renaissance within European history. Charles Homer Haskins’s (1870–1937) book *The Renaissance of the twelfth century* (1927),

⁹ For a larger history of the concept of Renaissance, see Thomas Maissen, ‘The view from Europe: the Renaissance’, in Thomas Maissen and Barbara Mittler, *Why China did not have a renaissance – and why that matters: an interdisciplinary dialogue* (Berlin and Boston, MA, 2018), pp. 53–81.

¹⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Berlin, Darmstadt, and Vienna, 1991), p. 81.

supposed the existence of at least two renaissances: one in the twelfth century, the other in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹¹ In the 1920s, Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) also pointed out the ‘problem of the Renaissance’; and from the 1940s, Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) tried to solve this problem by distinguishing between the ‘renascences’ and ‘the Renaissance’.¹² We can say that, to a certain extent, especially in the case of Haskins, the Renaissance had already been turned into a trans-historical ‘type of society’ or, to use Toynbee’s terms, a ‘recurrent phenomenon’ in human history. It is true that Toynbee’s conceptualization of the renaissance took a bolder step. While for scholars like Haskins the ‘renaissance’ ceased to have a *time* of its own, for Toynbee it also ceased to have a *space* of its own: as a *type*, and not just an event, the ‘renaissance’ could happen in many different spatial settings of the Earth. But even in this regard Toynbee already had some predecessors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Maurice Hauriou (1856–1929).¹³

In a way, Toynbee’s ‘multiple renaissances’ owed their existence to a century-long tendency to use chronological concepts – originally designed to name a period or an event within a period – to describe what could be called, in Max Weber’s (1864–1920) terms, ‘ideal types’ of societies. ‘Modernity’ has been one of the most successful of those typological concepts. It used to mean just the ‘present’ – that is, anything that happened in the present time – but in the nineteenth century it started being used as the ideal type of a particular form of society, adopted a more or less explicit evolutionist framework, and was used to inscribe human societies within a standard historical path. According to this teleological use of ‘modern’, two coeval groups could be synchronic from the point of view of *physical* time, but live in different ages from the point of view of *historical* time: if a group had certain characteristics, it was ‘modern’; if it did not, it was ‘traditional’ (that is, ‘pre-modern’).¹⁴ The terms ‘Enlightenment’, ‘Renaissance’, and ‘Reformation’ followed a similar pattern:

¹¹ Charles Haskins, *The Renaissance of the twelfth century* (Cambridge, 1927). Toynbee quotes this book in Toynbee, *Study of history*, ix, p. 45.

¹² Johan Huizinga, *Das Problem der Renaissance. Renaissance und Realismus* (Berlin, 1991; orig. edn 1920); Erwin Panofsky, ‘Renaissance and renascences’, *Kenyon Review*, 6 (1944), pp. 201–36.

¹³ Indeed, Toynbee’s ‘multiple renaissances’ seem to share some elements with Hauriou’s historical theory of cyclical ‘renaissances’ and ‘middle ages’, the former being periods under state domination and the latter periods without state domination. According to Hauriou, these cycles had been part of ‘Mediterranean history’, but he also claimed that, if these cycles came to be discovered in other ‘civilizations’, their ‘alternation’ might turn out to be a ‘law of progress’ of world historical significance. However, despite these common ideas, Toynbee’s volume about the ‘renaissances’ in his *Study of history* does not seem take Hauriou’s work into account. See Maurice Hauriou, ‘L’alternance des moyen-ages et des renaissances et ses conséquences sociales’, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 3 (1895), pp. 527–49.

¹⁴ For the semantic history of this term, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (New York, NY, 1983), pp. 208–9, s.v. ‘Modern’; and Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, ‘Modernität, Moderne’, in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart

they were seen as necessary ‘stages’ in the West’s march towards ‘modernity’, and in this sense they contained the ‘ideal typical’ features of ‘modern’ societies.

The ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis was certainly part of this longer history of chronological typification. But it also followed its own historical path. On the one hand, Toynbee’s renaissance as a ‘species of event’ resulted from the endeavour to create typological concepts of time: in order to conceive the idea of ‘multiple renaissances’, the renaissance could no longer be taken as an event, a period, or a purely operative term for the chronological description of Western history, but as an ideal type which could be used to analyse ‘recurrent phenomena’ in human societies. On the other hand, this thesis was intended to reduce, or even get rid of, the teleological implications of previous uses of the term ‘renaissance’, for it did not take the ‘renaissance’ as a historical step within an imaginary historical line towards a preconceived end. In Toynbee’s book, his ‘renaissances’ had some teleological implications – in the sense that all civilizations could go through them – but the fact that they were embedded in different historical paths made it impossible to know the end of the story.

A second intellectual source of Toynbee’s thought was probably supplied by the different ‘revivalist’ renaissances of the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. In those decades, there were groups of people both within and outside Europe who shared a similar claim: they argued that their ‘culture’, ‘civilization’, ‘nation’, or ‘race’ had experienced or was experiencing a sort of revival or a rejuvenation which – with a more or less explicit hint at early modern Italian/European history – deserved the label of ‘renaissance’. Intellectuals, politicians, journalists, professors, poets, and religious leaders from Europe to Asia, from Africa to America, made such claims. The ‘Irish Renaissance’ (or ‘Celtic Renaissance’)¹⁵ and the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ are two of the most well-known examples in Europe and North America; they both referred to the revival of a nation or a culture. In the non-European world, there were many examples too. I will focus here on the ‘Indian Renaissance’.

The ‘Indian Renaissance’ deserves particular attention. Since many proponents of the Indian Renaissance wrote in English, and were in contact with the other ‘renaissance bearers’ at the metropole, the different versions of the Indian Renaissance were almost immediately available to English-speaking readers. And precisely because this renaissance was not European, it may have inspired Toynbee’s ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis. Aurobindo Ghose (or Sri Aurobindo, 1872–1950) – an important nationalist activist and, after the 1910s, a spiritual leader – is a good example. During his early years at King’s College London, where he studied for a career in the imperial civil service, Aurobindo established close relations with Irish nationalists and poets. Some

Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. iv (Stuttgart, 1992), pp. 93–131.

¹⁵ Cornelius Weygandt, *Irish plays and playwrights* (Boston, MA, and New York, NY, 1913), pp. 1–5.

of them, like James Cousins (1873–1956), belonged to the so-called Irish Renaissance and even helped to spread Aurobindo's ideas and writings: for example, Cousins's *New ways in English literature*—which pays as much attention to Irish as to Indian writers—has a whole chapter on Aurobindo.¹⁶ Cousins was very important for Aurobindo's conception of the renaissance. Immediately after the publication of *New ways*, in 1918, Cousins published in Madras a book called *The Indian Renaissance*, in which he said:

Some people regard the recurrence of a thing as a proof of its existence Therefore I have suspected the Renaissance in India. ... I have suspected the Indian Renaissance because it is the fourth or fifth of the species that I have come across; and I have wondered if, after all, I have only brought with me a renaissance-habit that would find signs of birth in a graveyard. ... In spite of my suspicion, I have to accept the Renaissance in India. I have to declare that India is awake.¹⁷

Aurobindo seems to have been deeply inspired by this book. In a famous essay called 'The Renaissance in India', which was also published in 1918, he responded to Cousins's book with the following observations:

There has been recently some talk of a Renaissance in India. A number of illuminating essays with that general title and subject have been given to us by a poet and subtle critic and thinker, Mr. James H. Cousins, and others have touched suggestively various sides of the growing movement towards a new life and a new thought that may well seem to justify the description ...

But after this positive assessment of Cousin's book, Aurobindo felt the need to be conceptually more precise about the 'Indian Renaissance':

There is a first question, whether at all there is really a Renaissance in India. ... The word carries the mind back to the turning point of European culture to which it was first applied ...; that is certainly not a type of renaissance that is at all possible in India. There is a closer resemblance to the recent Celtic movement in Ireland, the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and building: in Ireland this was discovered by a return to the Celtic spirit and culture after a long period of eclipsing English influences, and in India something of the same kind of movement is appearing and has especially taken a pronounced turn since the political outburst of 1905. But even here the analogy does not give the whole truth.¹⁸

This paragraph is very telling for a number of different reasons. First, it shows that Aurobindo was part of a larger group of 'renaissance bearers' in India. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there had indeed been books published in India, especially in Bengal, which bore the title 'Indian Renaissance' or 'Bengal Renaissance'. Although Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) had already

¹⁶ James Cousins, *New ways in English literature* (Madras, 1917).

¹⁷ James Cousins, *The Renaissance in India* (Madras, 1918), pp. 3–6.

¹⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India and other essays in Indian culture* (Pondicherry, 1997), pp. 3–4.

made an explicit comparison between Bengal and Renaissance Italy, this discourse seems to have become particularly important within the nationalist movement that developed in Calcutta in the first decade of the twentieth century. Aurobindo, like Cousins himself, probably owed his concept of ‘Indian Renaissance’ to this group.¹⁹ Second, the paragraph makes explicit both the Irish and the early modern European inspirations for Aurobindo’s idea of the Indian Renaissance. For him, neither the ‘turning point of European culture’ nor the ‘Celtic movement in Ireland’ – another expression for the Irish Renaissance – have the same features as the Indian Renaissance; but, at the same time, he acknowledges that he cannot talk about the ‘renaissance’ without thinking of these two models. Finally, this paragraph is symptomatic of the increasing typification of the ‘renaissance’ concept in the 1920s. Aurobindo explicitly describes the Irish, European, and Indian renaissances as ‘types’: the European renaissance is not ‘the type of renaissance’ which is possible in India; India is experiencing ‘something of the same kind of movement’ that exists in Ireland; and he later writes that the ‘type of the Indian renaissance’ consists of an ‘awakening’ after a long period of European oppression. In other words, Aurobindo sees all these renaissances (which are renaissances, re-births, awakenings, or rejuvenations) as different types of a single concept.

Such uses of the renaissance were certainly not just an English-speaking phenomenon. As we have seen, since the nineteenth century, civilizational, cultural, and national renaissances have been a recurrent topic well beyond the English-speaking world, and they converged with the vocabularies of ‘revival’ which had long semantic histories of their own in each of the places where the renaissance was evoked. The ‘Nahda’ concept in the Arab-speaking countries, especially in places like Cairo and Beirut, was not very far from Aurobindo’s renaissance: sometimes translated as ‘renaissance’, sometimes as ‘enlightenment’, sometimes even as ‘risorgimento’, the word *nahda* – whose root means ‘to rise’ – referred to a literary, cultural, and, in some versions, civilizational revival which, for some of the actors, recalled the European renaissance.²⁰ The idea was that the Arab or Muslim nations had to go through a ‘renaissance’ before reaching ‘modernity’ (*hadatha*).²¹ In China (as we will see below) and Japan there was a similar historical juncture: a ‘renaissance’ – in the sense of a revival or rejuvenation, and sometimes with an explicit reference to the European renaissance and to the Enlightenment – seemed to be necessary for national self-assertion. Such ‘renaissance’ rhetoric seems to have been a

¹⁹ See Tatiana Skorokhodova, ‘The Bengal renaissance: the idea, term and system of symbolic description’, *Modern Research Studies*, 2 (2015), pp. 738–68.

²⁰ Anne-Laure Dupont, ‘Introduction’, in *Giorgi Zaydan (1861–1914), écrivain réformiste et témoin de la renaissance arabe* (Beirut, 2014), pp. 15–38, open access edition <https://books.open-edition.org/ifpo/5467>.

²¹ Nada Tomiche, ‘Nahda’, in C. O. Bosworth et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. VII (Leiden, 1993), pp. 900–3; and Leyla Dakhli, ‘La Nahda (notice pour le dictionnaire de l’Humanisme arabe)’, 2012, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00747086/document>.

widespread phenomenon among different groups (mostly elites) either in the colonized world or in those parts of the world which had suffered colonial aggressions. More generally, it was common in nationalist and reform-oriented movements everywhere, especially when the former admiration towards Europe was turned into suspicion after the First World War.

In many respects, Arnold Toynbee's 'renaissances' were just one more contribution to this widespread discourse. Decades before he published the ninth volume of *A study of history*, this discourse had been re-enacted again and again in books, translations, and by travellers – and probably also in oral exchanges that were never recorded. It was mobilized in universities, political organizations, colonial administrations, and literary societies within and beyond Europe. And the Irish Renaissance and the Indian Renaissance were indubitably part of Toynbee's world, because they travelled through the English language. How could Toynbee ignore these different 'renaissances' and the typological language often used to describe them?

However, Toynbee did not share the positive perception of the renaissance which characterized so many nationalist and modernist discourses in the European and non-European world. He seems to have been fed by another trend: he was one of those European intellectuals who were disappointed by the world order of the belle époque – with its self-assertive attitude and its faith in progress and liberalism – and who had seen in the First World War the sign of the 'civilizational' decline of the West. In this respect, Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), through his *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918–23), became a central reference in the 1920s and '30s, and to a large extent set the intellectual agenda of this approach. Toynbee, who himself contributed to the consolidation of this perspective, shared many of Spengler's ideas. But he had a position of his own. While Spengler was a fervent nationalist, Toynbee considered the nation-state to be one of the major evils of Western civilization and thought that even the *milletts* of the Ottoman empire were a better political formation than nation-states.²² He considered the nation-state a parochial form of polity, and he thought that the world was inexorably marching towards a complete political unification – either through a larger consensus in international relations (the path he believed in) or through war. He thought that each civilization went through a process of rise and decline; in that process, civilizations experienced a 'time of troubles' which only a revived 'creativity' could overcome. The West, like many other civilizations, had gone

²² Arnold Toynbee, *A study of history*, vol. VIII (London, New York, NY, and Toronto, 1954), p. 313: 'the institutional future seemed likely to lie far less with the Western institution of the national state than with the Syriac institution of the millet; and, while the architects of constitution for the World might find useful ideas for the construction of their basement in the works of the fathers of the Constitution of the United States, the classic organization of the Millet system in the Ottoman Empire by the genius of Mehemet the Conqueror might prove to be a more fruitful source of inspiration for the design of the living rooms in this promised house of many mansions'.

through such a ‘time of trouble’ in the First World War and might not survive. It had abandoned its humanistic and Christian traditions and turned to the worship of an ‘unregenerate Human Nature’.²³

Such a state of mind led in some cases to the sort of optimistic ‘renaissance’ rhetoric that we saw in Aurobindo and, more generally, in other ‘cultural’ or ‘national’ renaissances; Italian fascist rhetoric was one such instance. In Toynbee’s case, it led to a more pessimistic attitude: he not only despised the European renaissance (like Spengler), but also made a negative assessment of any sort of ‘revival of the dead’, no matter where it took place. Although Toynbee admitted that new creative forces might emerge from the ‘renaissances’, as had happened in different civilizations, he saw in these ‘recurring events’ of world history a ‘necromancy’, the useless invocation of the dead in a desperate endeavour for self-preservation.

III

As we have seen, Toynbee’s project of decentring and multiplying the ‘renaissances’ was by no means unique. In fact, it was a late contribution to more general discussions about the uniqueness of the Renaissance within European history and about the different renaissances in both European and non-European contexts. It is difficult to say which of these discussions inspired Toynbee, and to what extent. But when we take a look at the ninth volume of *A study of history*, we find that a particular referent played a key role: the discussions among early twentieth-century Chinese scholars on the ‘Chinese Renaissance’. These Chinese debates – themselves connected with worldwide discussions on the renaissance – were for Toynbee’s *Study of history* far more important than Aurobindo’s reflections. The key connection in this regard was Hu Shi, a well-known Chinese scholar and Toynbee’s colleague and friend. Although Hu Shi, like Aurobindo, may have been partially inspired by the Irish Renaissance,²⁴ his ‘Chinese Renaissance’ harks back both to the English-speaking historiography on the Italian and European Renaissance and to a century-long use of the notion of ‘renaissance’ in the Chinese-speaking world.

Toynbee and Hu Shi appear to have met in the 1920s. At that time, Toynbee was already a professor at the London School of Economics (LSE) and, after 1924, director of studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), again in London. He was present at Hu Shi’s lecture on ‘The Renaissance in China’ in 1926, at the RIIA; some days earlier, he had attended Hu Shi’s lecture at the LSE and had had dinner with him.²⁵ In 1933, Hu Shi gave the

²³ Ian Hall, “‘Time of troubles’: Arnold J. Toynbee’s twentieth century”, *International Affairs*, 90 (2014), pp. 23–36, at p. 31.

²⁴ Gamsa, ‘Uses and misuses’, p. 641.

²⁵ Susan Chan Egan and Chou Chih P’ing, eds., *A pragmatist and his free spirit: the half-century romance between Hu Shi and Edith Clifford Williams* (Hong Kong, 2009), p. 195.

Haskell lectures on the ‘The Chinese Renaissance’ at the University of Chicago, and his lectures were published with the same title the following year; *The Chinese Renaissance* was to become a well-known book in the English-speaking world.²⁶ By then, both Toynbee and Hu Shi were members of the Institute of Pacific Relations, and Hu Shi was chair of its International Research Committee.²⁷ In China, Hu Shi was a major figure. He had been a protagonist of the so-called New Culture Movement of the 1910s and the May Fourth movement in 1919. He had been a radical advocate of a ‘literary revolution’ against classical Chinese and during the 1920s claimed to be a ‘pragmatist’ in philosophy and a ‘liberal’ (or ‘liberal socialist’) in politics.²⁸ His articles and public interventions largely shaped the Chinese intellectual agenda of the 1920s and ’30s; he was well connected to university and political circles and had been very active abroad, especially in the United States and Great Britain. By the time that he delivered his Haskell lectures in Chicago, he was not only a major intellectual figure in China, but had also ‘made his mark internationally as a scholar, philosopher, critic and educator’.²⁹

Toynbee had great respect for Hu Shi. In the ninth volume of *A study of history*, published twenty years after Hu Shi’s lectures in Chicago, Toynbee praised his colleague and friend as the man who made possible in China the ‘tardy cultural enfranchisement’ of the ‘Sinic classical incubus’: that is, of classical Chinese and its literary traditions. In the section ‘renaissances of literatures and languages’, he refers to Hu Shi’s ‘literary revolution’ and says:

In a feat of cultural iconoclasm which was as salutary as it was sacrilegious, the bull who led the way into the china shop was the eminent scholar, man of letters, and philosopher who has been so largely quoted in the last few pages of the present chapter [i.e. Hu Shi]; and anyone who is curious to know the details of this fascinating episode of cultural history should read Hu Shih’s own authoritative account of the events of which he himself was *magna pars*.³⁰

More than any other author, Hu Shi was the most important inspiration for Toynbee’s hypotheses on Chinese ‘renaissances’. For Hu Shi, ‘the Chinese Renaissance’ was the ‘literary revolution’ he had started in the 1910s; it deserved this name because, just like the European Renaissance, it relied on

²⁶ This is what Hyman Kublin claims in his preface to the 1961 reprint of Hu Shi’s lectures. He says that *The Chinese Renaissance* is ‘the book by which he is best known in this country [the USA]’. The preface is reproduced in Maissen and Mittler, *Why China did not have a renaissance*, pp. 216–18.

²⁷ *Pacific Affairs*, 5 (Sept. 1932), p. 854.

²⁸ Jerome Grieder, *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 213. Hu Shi was actually reluctant to use ‘-isms’ and ideological labels to describe his positions, as he had famously claimed in his 1919 article ‘Duo yanjiu xie wenti, shao tan xie “zhuyi”’ 多研究些問題，少談些‘主義’ (‘Study more about problems, talk less about “isms”’), published in *Meizhou pinglun* 每周評論, 31 (1919).

²⁹ Maissen and Mittler, *Why China did not have a renaissance*, p. 217.

³⁰ Toynbee, *Study of history*, ix, p. 78.

a revival of the vernacular language, on a movement of ‘reason against tradition’, and on ‘humanist’ methods and approaches.³¹ In *A study of history*, Toynbee used Hu Shi’s ideas to describe the fight between the constantly resuscitated classical Chinese traditions and a living vernacular language. We can see this in the following quote from Hu Shi’s *The Chinese Renaissance*, which Toynbee uses to organize the sections he dedicates to the ‘renaissances of literatures and languages’. Hu Shi’s quote begins:

I found that the history of Chinese literature consisted of two parallel movements: there was the classical literature of the scholars, the men of letters, the poets of the imperial courts, and of the *élite*, but there was in every age an undercurrent of literary development among the common people which produced the folk songs of love and heroism, the songs of the dancer, the epic stories of the street reciter, the drama of the village theater and, most important of all, the novels. I found that it was always these new forms and patterns of the common people that, from time to time, furnished the new blood and fresh vigour to the literature of the literati, and rescued it from the perpetual danger of fossilization.

He goes on to discuss why the living language of the common people was constantly oppressed:

Why did it take so long for this living language of such wide currency and with such a rich output in literature to receive due recognition as the most fitting instrumentality for education and for literary composition? ... The explanation is simple. The authority of the language of the classics was truly too great to be easily overcome in the days of the empire. This authority became almost invincible when it was enforced by the power of a long united empire and reinforced by the universal system of state examinations, under which the only channel of civil advancement for any man was through the mastery of classical language and literature. The rise of the national languages in modern Europe was greatly facilitated by the absence of a united empire and of a universal system of classical examination It is therefore no mere accident that the revolution in Chinese Literature came ten years after the abolition of the civil examinations in A.D. 1905, and several years after the political revolution of A.D. 1911–1912.³²

Toynbee quoted this long paragraph to illustrate a major point: the fight between the living and the dead, and more generally why any ‘necromancy’ of the dead goes against the living forces of a civilization. Hu Shi’s influence actually went even further. If we take a look at his *Chinese Renaissance*, and more particularly at the source chapter of this long quote, we will find Hu Shi had already applied the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis to Chinese history. He claimed that China had experienced other ‘minor’ renaissances in the past; the ‘Chinese renaissance’ of the 1910s was certainly the most radical one, a ‘fully conscious and studied’ one, but these previous renaissances had ‘contributed to the periodic renewals of vitality in an old civilization’:

³¹ Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance: the Haskell Lectures 1933* (Chicago, IL, 1934), p. 44.

³² Toynbee, *Study of history*, ix, pp. 76–8, citing Hu Shi, *Chinese Renaissance*, pp. 52–61.

Historically, there had been many periods of Chinese Renaissance. The rise of the great poets in the T'ang Dynasty, the simultaneous movement for a new prose literature modelled after the style of the Classical period, and the development of Zen Buddhism as a Chinese reformation of an Indian religion – these represented the First Chinese Renaissance. The great reform movements in the eleventh century, the subsequent development of a powerful secular neoconfucianist philosophy ... – all these important developments of the Sung Dynasty may be regarded as the Second Renaissance. The rise of the dramas in the thirteenth century, and the rise of the great novels in a later period ... may be called the Third Renaissance. And lastly, the revolt in the seventeenth century against the rational philosophy of the Sung and Ming dynasties, and the development of a new technique in classical scholarship in the last three hundred years with its philological and historical approach and its strict emphasis on the importance of documentary evidence – these, too, may be called the Fourth Renaissance.³³

However, Hu Shi thought that these renaissances were merely frustrated endeavours to impose the vernacular language and empirical methods of scholarship.³⁴ The real renaissance was the literary revolution that had been going on since the 1910s. Unlike the previous 'renaissances', which were not conscious of their 'historical mission', his literary revolution produced what the other renaissances could not: 'a new language, a new literature, a new outlook on life and society, a new scholarship'.³⁵ This conception of the renaissance relied on Hu Shi's perception of what the 'Western Renaissance' had been: not only a revival of the letters and arts of high antiquity, but also, and especially, the development of vernacular languages and a reaction against tradition. Since the early twentieth century, China had been going through a process of vernacularization of its written language in all the different domains of human activity, from literary production to administrative documents. Instead of keeping the traditional classical language, universities and political institutions took as a model the oral language of imperial officials; in this way, less prestigious forms of vernacular texts, especially novels, were placed at the centre of the debates about the 'Chinese Renaissance'. Since the vernacularization of language and the emergence of such a new way of life had been, in Hu Shi's opinion, an intrinsic feature of the 'Western Renaissance', he considered that the 'epochal change' of his 'literary revolution' was not *a* renaissance, but *the* renaissance in China.

Toynbee did not agree with Hu Shi on every topic. He followed Hu Shi's description of the Chinese literary revolution, and especially his general conception of Chinese literary history; but precisely because he respected Hu Shi, he thought that his 'revolt' against tradition should not be reduced to a simple 'renaissance'. In a footnote, Toynbee claimed:

³³ Hu Shi, *Chinese Renaissance*, p. 45.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–7.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

This latter-day Chinese revolt against the incubus of a classical Sinic language and literature is itself ‘the Chinese Renaissance’ according to Hu Shih’s terminology, whereas, according to the usage followed in this Study [*A study of history*], it would figure as the ‘Chinese Anti-Renaissance’ in reaction against a previous resuscitation of the language and literature of an antecedent civilization which would rank as ‘the Chinese Renaissance’ according to our usage of the term.³⁶

In other words, Toynbee thought that the actual ‘Chinese renaissances’ were all the previous revivals of the vernacular language and literature that Hu Shi described, and not what Hu Shi called ‘the Chinese Renaissance’ – that is, what China was experiencing since the 1910s. For Hu Shi, these previous renaissances were merely frustrated projects. For Toynbee, in contrast, they were proper representatives of the ‘renaissance’ species, and for that reason they deserved a negative assessment; they had been attempts to revive an ancient ‘Sinic imperial régime’ and, in this sense, they could not produce anything new. Toynbee saw the real ‘epochal change’ as occurring when a civilization managed to produce something new and go against the necromancy of the renaissances. He claimed that, in the Chinese case, this transformation was the result of Hu Shi’s literary revolution and, through it, of the ‘impact of an alien Western culture’.³⁷ He was thus both contradicting and honouring Hu Shi. By claiming that Hu Shi’s literary revolution was not a renaissance but an anti-renaissance, he distinguished Hu Shi from the ‘necromancers’ he despised and raised him to the role of a cultural hero. Hu Shi’s revolution was not a revival of the past, but a civilizational transformation oriented towards the future.

Hu Shi was certainly not the only source for Toynbee’s description of Chinese history; Toynbee also quoted the works of Otto Franke (1863–1946), Luther Carrington Goodrich (1894–1986), and Henri Maspero (1883–1945) to support the different points he made on this subject. But for him Hu Shi was much more than an information provider: he was both an interlocutor and the source of a conceptual framework, as demonstrated by the structure of the ninth volume of Toynbee’s *Study of history*. It is true that, before quoting Hu Shi for the first time, Toynbee had already made his point about multiple renaissances; some pages before, he discussed Oswald Spengler’s and Robin George Collingwood’s (1889–1943) conceptions of the Western Renaissance, and used J. B. Bury’s (1861–1927) *The idea of progress* to support Spengler’s position that the Renaissance was nothing more than an ‘unsuccessful revolt’.³⁸ But in those pages he only used these authors to discuss the European renaissance, and not his ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis. When he gets to Hu Shi, it is the first time in the volume that Toynbee quotes and discusses a scholar who shares with him the assumption that the renaissance can be found outside Europe and that

³⁶ Toynbee, *Study of history*, ix, p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 66–7.

it is, in this sense, a ‘recurrent phenomenon’ which happens in different times and places. This is indeed what Hu Shi suggested in his lectures. Without explicitly turning it into a general framework of historical analysis, as in Toynbee’s work, Hu Shi had already claimed the validity of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis by applying it to the analysis of Chinese history.

IV

When we consider these two ‘renaissance’ versions, one in England and one in China, we may get the feeling that they are like twin brothers who parted from each other when they were young, who lived for a long time on the two extremes of the Eurasian continent, and who found each other transformed when they met again. This feeling would not be totally misleading. Indeed, Hu Shi’s ‘renaissance’, though partially taken from the ‘dormitories in the American universities’ (as Hu Shi acknowledged), resulted from a long tradition of uses and debates about the ‘renaissance’ in China. This tradition had loaded the multiple and halting equivalents of ‘renaissance’ – sometimes neologisms, sometimes old expressions – with the connotations that an evolving Chinese language made available for its users. The historical experiences of innumerable speakers of Chinese, in China and abroad, brought these equivalents into different scenarios and engaged them with different imaginaries; and thus every time this ‘Chinese’ renaissance met its twin ‘English’ brother, who had also experienced an eventful life, they both had new tales to tell each other. In this sense, when Toynbee rediscovered the ‘renaissance’ in Hu Shi’s text, he became acquainted with the latest results of a decades-long discussion on the ‘Chinese Renaissance’. What, then, were the ‘Chinese’ experiences which lay behind Hu Shi’s uses of ‘renaissance’? To answer this question, I will analyse how the ‘renaissance’, in the Chinese-speaking context, followed its own path and produced ready-made ‘ideal types’ to reinterpret the Chinese past.

When the idea of ‘the renaissance’ became known in China, it was not necessarily strange to a Chinese reader: this ‘re-birth’ had a family resemblance to many concepts of the centuries-old Chinese historiographical tradition. Indeed, there were in imperial Chinese historiography a number of archetypical conceptions of historical time which – though expressed through specific concepts in classical Chinese – could act as common semantic ground for ‘revivals’, ‘re-births’, ‘awakenings’, ‘renaissances’, and other analogous concepts. These archetypical perceptions of historical time – ‘chronotypes’, as they have been called by Bender and Wellbery³⁹ – made it easier to welcome the renaissance into the Chinese-speaking world. And once the renaissance was reframed in new discourses, especially the one associated with Italy and Europe, it gained

³⁹ John B. Bender and David D. Wellbery, eds., *Chronotypes: the construction of time* (Stanford, CA, 1991).

a life of its own and became part of the justification of different political projects and historical narratives.

During its Chinese life between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the renaissance followed different patterns: first, it was taken as the concept of a European event which looked like many other Chinese ‘revivals’; second, it was differentiated from other Chinese ‘revivals’ and became the name of a prestigious and completely exceptional event in European history; third, the European-inspired renaissance was ‘discovered’ in the Chinese past itself; fourth and finally, the renaissance proved to be a trans-historical concept which could be located in both the present and the future of China. These patterns did not necessarily follow a chronological order. Although some of them became more prominent in one period and not in another, one effect of the rapid conceptual changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the East Asian region was that they all coexisted for some time.

The history of the renaissance in the East Asian region has been thoroughly studied.⁴⁰ I will limit myself here to pointing out its most salient features. The interaction between the word ‘renaissance’ and one of its more successful equivalents in Chinese, *wenyi fuxing* 文藝復興 (‘revival of letters and arts’), started around the 1830s. This happened before the ‘renaissance’ became in Europe the name of a particular ‘culture’, as in Jacob Burckhardt’s work. It happened even before ‘renaissance’ became the name of a period, because before the Bourbon restoration in France the word ‘renaissance’ was just one expression among others to describe the early modern revival of antiquity. It was precisely in this casual way that the *The East–West Examiner and Monthly Magazine* (*Dong xi yang kao meiyue tongji zhuan* 東西洋考每月統記傳), a magazine edited in China by the Prussian missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803–51), used the expression *wenyi fuxing* to characterize the Italian Renaissance.⁴¹ We cannot know whether *fuxing* 復興 (‘revival’, ‘rejuvenation’) evoked in the author’s mind merely a ‘revival’ or the ‘Renaissance’ in the strong sense, and it does not really matter for our purpose: *wenyi fuxing* seemed as good as any European concept to describe what had happened in Italy during the quattrocento and the cinquecento. In Chinese imperial historiographical discourse, the word *fuxing* had a long tradition: it was used to describe dynastic revivals, poetic rejuvenations, and especially ‘restorations’ of different sorts. The expression *wenyi*

⁴⁰ For an overview, see Chen Jianshou 陳建守, ‘Jindai Zhongguo gainian cihui zhi yanjiu yu zhanwang: yi “wenyi fuxing” he “qimeng yundong” weili’ 近代中國概念詞彙之研究與展望: 以‘文藝復興’和‘啟蒙運動’為例 (‘Research and prospects of the modern Chinese conceptual vocabulary: taking “renaissance” and “enlightenment” as examples’), *Dongya guannian shi jikan* 東亞觀念史集刊, 6 (2014), pp. 195–251; Zhang Ke 章可, ‘Hanyu shixue gainian ruhe xingcheng: yi wenyi fuxing zai jindai Zhongguo weili’ 漢語史學概念如何形成: 以‘文藝復興’在近代中國為例 (‘How historiographical concepts in Chinese took shape: taking the example of the “renaissance” in modern China’), *Zhongguo lishi pinglun* 中國歷史評論 (2015), issue 9, pp. 105–25; Barbara Mittler, ‘The view from China: r/Renaissances’, in Maissen and Mittler, *Why China did not have a renaissance*, pp. 83–119.

⁴¹ Zhang Ke, ‘Hanyu shixue’, p. 110.

(‘letters and arts’) was a standard term as well. But once put together and associated with European early modernity, the combined expression became a means for a semantic interconnection between Chinese and European discourses on the ‘renaissance’. *Wenyi fuxing* was now available to absorb the semantic contingencies of the words that, in Europe, were used to describe the Italian quattrocento and cinquecento, and in this way it became entangled with European discourses about the renaissance.

At this early stage, availability did not mean success. Later on, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, other expressions were more frequently used to refer to the Italian or European Renaissance; and, like a large part of the modern Chinese vocabulary, the association between the Chinese concepts of revival and the post-Burckhardtian ‘renaissance’ happened through the translation of Japanese works. During the first decades of the twentieth century, in essays, historical works, and journal titles, we find expressions that mean ‘revival of knowledge’ (*xuewen fuxing* 學問復興), ‘revival of antiquity’ (*fugu* 復古, which in the Chinese tradition had traditionally been used to describe the revival of ancient learning), ‘resuscitation of the movement of letters’ (*wenyun fuhuo* 文運復活), or ‘time of a new birth’ (or just ‘re-birth’, *zaisheng shidai* 再生時代).⁴² *Wenyi fuxing* was just one of these expressions. These hesitant translations reflected the particular situation of the ‘renaissance’ in this period of Chinese history: when these words were not used in the same casual way, they only referred to a particular period of European history. However, in a few years, the association between these translations and the European referent became stronger and tended to transform some Chinese words – especially *wenyi fuxing*, but also the other terms – into the ideal type of a historical process: it was the *sort* of process that had led the West along the path of ‘wealth and strength’. Once this normative ideal type of renaissance took shape in China, someone eventually came up with the questions: had China already had a renaissance itself? Did it need one?

In the 1920s, these questions became implicated in two larger debates. The first, which was similar to many others taking place in the non-European world, concerned the question of a ‘national revival’; the second, more specific to Chinese nationalism, was the attitude towards Confucianism and, more generally, towards the imperial past. From the radical rejection of Confucianism in the 1910s to its recovery as a state ideology in the 1930s under the form of the New Life movement, Confucianism represented for modernists and nationalists a paradoxical object: for some, the Confucian or imperial tradition embodied national identity itself; for others, it signified an obstacle to ‘modernization’ and hindered national survival. The ‘renaissance’ discourse was involved in these discussions and its meaning changed according to each position. From *narodnik*-style populists to cultural conservatives, from socialists to liberals, the rhetoric of the ‘renaissance’ – and more precisely of a

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 105–25; Mittler, ‘The view from China’, pp. 99–104.

renaissance which was inspired by the early modern Italian or European Renaissance – played a fundamental role in articulating discourses of national rejuvenation or national salvation.⁴³

From these debates, I will choose two examples within the ‘neo-traditionalist’ and ‘the radical-liberal’ spectrum: Liang Qichao for the former and Hu Shi himself for the latter. As is well known, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) had been a leading reform-minded scholar-official in the 1890s. He belonged to a generation of nationalist activists who had intended to turn the Qing empire into a constitutional monarchy. He had also supported the creation of a ‘Confucian religion’ to become the pillar of a ‘New China’, and after the Qing fell in 1912, he supported the Republic both against Yuan Shikai’s (1859–1916) monarchic restoration in 1915 and against the Qing restoration in 1917. However, despite these earlier political positions, Liang Qichao became increasingly sensitive to the ‘failures’ of the West. Like Toynbee, he was shocked by the First World War, and in the late 1910s and early ’20s he reappraised the Confucian tradition and saw in it the remedies for the evil things of the West. It is therefore no accident that he thought that the ‘Chinese renaissance’ had taken place in the imperial past. In his *Outline of the scholarship of the Qing dynasty* (*Qingdai xueshu gailun* 清代學術概論), which he wrote in 1920, he said:

What did ‘Qing thought’ consist of? To put it in simple words: it was a great reaction against the ‘study of principle’ during the Song and Ming periods and it took the ‘recovery of antiquity’ as its vocation and ambition. Its motives and content were totally analogous to those of the European Renaissance (*Ouzhou zhi wenyi fuxing* 歐洲之文藝復興, ‘European revival of letters and arts’).⁴⁴

Liang Qichao’s intention was clear: he wanted to show that the imperial tradition had been ‘modern’ in its own way. Although he admitted that the ‘Chinese renaissance’ or ‘recovery of antiquity’ had already declined, the implicit conclusion, very significant at the time, was that the Qing tradition was compatible with modernity and therefore deserved to be in some way preserved in Republican China. This claim was not his alone; other scholars and intellectuals, especially among the cultural conservatives involved in the *National Essence Journal* (*Guocui xuebao* 國粹學報), shared a similar idea.

A second form of ‘renaissance’ was represented by Hu Shi, who explicitly criticized such claims.⁴⁵ Like Sri Aurobindo, Hu Shi may have been inspired by the Irish Renaissance while he studied at Cornell and Columbia in the 1910s;⁴⁶ but by his own admission, his actual inspiration in this regard was Edith Sichel’s

⁴³ Mittler, ‘The view from China’, pp. 99–104.

⁴⁴ Liang Qichao, *Qingdai xueshu gailun* (1920), in *Yinbing shi heji* 飲冰室合集 (*Collected works of the Ice-Drinking Studio*), *Zhuanji* 專集, 34 (Beijing, 1988), p. 3.

⁴⁵ For the debate between Hu Shi and Liang Qichao, see Joseph Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-ch’ao and the mind of modern China* (Cambridge, MA, 1953), pp. 214–18.

⁴⁶ Gamsa, ‘Uses and misuses’, p. 641.

(1862–1914) *The Renaissance*, which had been published in 1914.⁴⁷ As a major figure of the New Culture and May Fourth movements, Hu Shi shared with many of his colleagues at Peking University the conviction that China needed to get rid of the remnants of the imperial and Confucian tradition. He later became slightly more lenient towards Confucianism and developed an even more hostile attitude against Buddhism and what he called the ‘Indianization’ of China: while Confucianism had developed some ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’ insights, Buddhism and the Indian tradition were the roots of Chinese obscurantism.⁴⁸ His main target was his colleague Liang Shuming (1893–1988). Liang claimed that ‘Indian philosophy’, especially Buddhism, was superior to both Western and Chinese philosophy. This was also the time that Liang started his project of ‘rural reconstruction’, believing, as the ‘last Confucian’, that he could revive the traditional peasant community to reinvigorate Chinese economy and society.

Hu Shi rejected these ideas and thought that the Chinese revival – which, as we have seen, he called ‘renaissance’ – would come from the scientific spirit that the West inherited from its own Renaissance. In his 1926 lectures at the RIA, he said:

It was [in 1915] that the new movement began which forms the title and the topic of my address to-night [i.e. ‘The Renaissance in China’]. In the years 1915 and 1916 groups of Chinese students in the American Universities were carrying on a controversy on problems of literature. The controversy began on a question of poetic diction and it gradually extended to the larger problem of Chinese literature. The results of the controversy were published in the early days of 1917, and formed the first declarations of a movement which has created a revolution in Chinese literature. This literary revolution marks the first stage in the Chinese Renaissance, for there will be found a spirit essentially different from the early stages of modernization.⁴⁹

This new type of renaissance did not encompass the imperial tradition; as Hu Shi claimed again later on in his Haskell lectures, this renaissance was supposed to recover the literary traditions of the vernacular language that the imperial elites had oppressed across the ages.⁵⁰ The present ‘renaissance’ was involved in the wider Chinese fight for ‘modernity’ against ‘tradition’:

⁴⁷ Edith Sichel, *The Renaissance* (London, 1914), is a short presentation of the Renaissance in different parts of Europe; for Sichel, the Renaissance was not only an Italian phenomenon, but a European one. In her ‘books recommended’, she mentions Jacob Burckhardt, Jules Michelet, and Walter Pater. The three of them seem to have played an important role in shaping her narrative.

⁴⁸ See Irene Eber, ‘Hu Shih and Chinese history: the problem of *Cheng-Li Kuo-Ku*’, *Monumenta Serica*, 27 (1968), pp. 169–207, esp. pp. 191 ff.

⁴⁹ Hu Shi, ‘The Renaissance in China’, *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 5 (1926), pp. 265–83, at pp. 270–1.

⁵⁰ Gang Zhou, ‘The Chinese Renaissance: a transcultural reading’, in Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gang Zhou, and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Other renaissances: a new approach to world literature* (New York, NY, 2006), pp. 113–31.

In the early days we wanted to be modern, but we were afraid of losing the other things which we were told were good. ... There is little wonder that the Chinese have continued to live in comfortable dreams of compromise But a new age has dawned. We have realized at last that certain things have to be given up if China is to live.⁵¹

We have already seen similar ideas being propounded in the Haskell lectures. What is important in this earlier lecture is that Hu Shi already ‘typified’ the renaissance in two different ways. First, just like Liang Qichao, and anticipating Toynbee, he treated the renaissance as a ‘species of historical event’ which could take place in China. Second, he disembedded the renaissance from any place and time of its own, because it not only happened in the past and in the West, but could also be started in the present and achieved in the future – if the conditions allowed it and if the actors were willing.

These ideas explain why, in his Chinese-language debates during the 1910s and ’20s, Hu Shi hesitated about the Chinese translation of the word ‘renaissance’. He was afraid to suggest some sort of ‘revival’ (as implied by the translations of ‘renaissance’ using the terms *faxing* and *fugu*) and to thereby give a distorted picture of his position regarding the vernacular language. He did not want to look like Liang Qichao, because what he called in English ‘the Chinese Renaissance’ pointed towards the future, not towards the past. This might explain why, as early as 1919, he said in his personal diary:

‘Time of a new (or re-)birth’ (*zaisheng* 再生) is the general term for the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in European history; its old translation is ‘revival of letters and arts’ (*wenyi faxing* 文藝復興). I consider that ‘revival of letters and arts’ does not reach its meaning, and it is not as good as directly translating its original meaning.⁵²

In contrast to the ‘revival of letters and arts’, and also to any renaissance concept that conveyed both a ‘progressive’ and a ‘conservative’ meaning, Hu Shi wanted to separate these two meanings into two different words. It is as if he wanted to distinguish the ‘Whig’ versions of the Renaissance, which considered this period as a step forward in Western history, from the ‘revivalist’ versions, both pessimistic (as in Toynbee) and enthusiastic (as in Aurobindo). He seems to have failed in this endeavour, because the ‘revival of letters and arts’ became the standard translation of the renaissance in contemporary Chinese. But Hu Shi’s conceptual struggles were not in vain. His general conception of the ‘renaissance’, and especially his own formulation of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis, reverberated in Toynbee’s work; and, through Toynbee, they have inadvertently reached the twenty-first-century advocates of the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis.

⁵¹ Hu Shi, ‘Renaissance in China’, p. 271.

⁵² Quoted in Chen Jianshou, ‘Jindai Zhongguo gainian cihui’, pp. 197–8.

V

To sum up: the ‘multiple renaissances’ thesis was part of a transcontinental conversation and represented a convergence between non-European nationalist modernisms and interwar European pessimism. As we have seen, this convergence was part of a more general process. From the nineteenth century onwards, the renaissance was constantly re-enacted in different contexts, from East to South Asia, from Europe to the Americas, and at each occurrence it increasingly tended towards the ideal type of a process or a culture. From one place to another, different groups gave the ‘renaissance’ a new meaning, and sometimes even divorced it from its former European reference. As time went by, when they spoke or wrote about the ‘renaissance’, the new versions of this concept often met each other – sometimes across continents and across oceans – and these encounters in turn produced new versions of the renaissance. Our short genealogy of the ‘multiple renaissances’, and more particularly the exchanges between Arnold Toynbee and Hu Shi, tells part of this history.

All this leads us to a major conclusion: it is no longer possible to recount the history of the renaissance category as a purely European history. We should certainly not forget asymmetries; we should not neglect the fact that Hu Shi, like Aurobindo and many others in the non-European world, felt that the renaissance – in Aurobindo’s words – ‘carries the mind back to that turning point of European culture to which it was first applied’.⁵³ But we should also bear in mind that Hu Shi gave a new life to this concept, and that to a certain extent he shaped, through his connections in America and England, the development of this concept in Europe proper. In this sense, the ‘renaissance’ category, with or without the European referent, long ago ceased to be a European category. Whether it still has any descriptive or heuristic value is for contemporary and future historians to decide.

⁵³ Aurobindo, *Renaissance in India*, p. 3.